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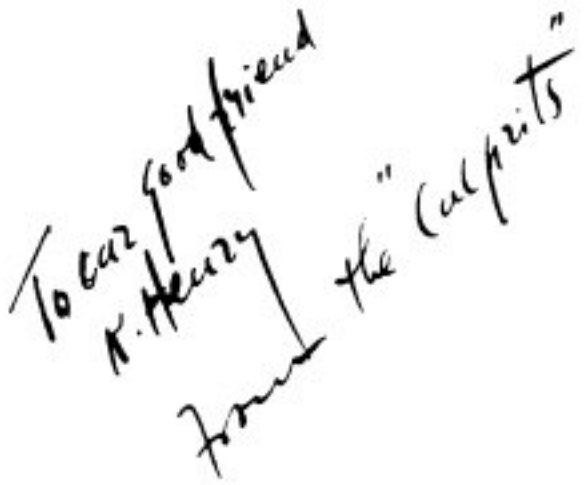

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GOPAL · *the* · JESTER

A Hindu Romance

NOW FIRST DONE FROM THE BENGALI INTO
ENGLISH BY

RAJANI KANTA BANNERJI

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

NIRMAL A. DAS
MEMBER OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

Illustrated by

AKOS D. HAMZA

New York
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INTRODUCTION

Students conversant with the folk-lore literature of India know that tragedy is the dominant theme of Sanskrit letters, the background of which is a fervent spiritual ideal stripped of all sordid realities of life.

The writers of Sanskrit literature have had an amazing influence upon the provincial languages such as Bengali, Hindi and others. To this day, tragedy motivates the literature of India.

In Bengal, where the scene of this book is laid, we find a literature exceptionally rich, but studiously avoiding the facetious stratum of life.

Gopal Bhand lived in the court of Rajah Krishna Chandra in Krishna-nagar in Bengal about two hundred years ago. Here tales have been circulated about this witty court-jester; but books on Gopal Bhand are socially banned; none the less, a great many people manage surreptitiously to read the merry tales about Gopal. And now, for the first time, Gopal's tales are presented before the English reading public, interwoven with unusual customs of the country.

It is not because Hindus are afraid of dealing with actualities of life, but because we do not help our community by exposing the apparently lurid love-life of the country, that esoteric literature has not become popular.

However, this is an honest attempt to present a true and unbiased view before intelligent readers.

Nirmal A. Das

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GOPAL THE JESTER

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CHAPTER I

Temple-bells, silver moon, glistening river and an impressionable youth—a phantom picture created by a strange god! Such was the atmosphere on the broken banks of that small island Navadwip, one evening, about two hundred years ago.

Tradition has woven a romantic tale around this island of the poets, priests and Rajahs. In a triangular corner of Navadwip, the sacred river Ganges came rushing down from the unknown cave in the Himalayas and met two timid rivers, which had agreed to part till they lost themselves in the ocean. The apex of the triangle, called Tribeni, because of its resemblance to the plaits of a woman's hair, greeted the three rivers in the evening glory!

What was true then is true now. An impressionable youth is not unknown to-day, but the romance of to-day is not as romantic as that of yore!

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GOPAL THE JESTER

On the broken banks of the Ganges stood a young man. His eyes followed the scarlet rays of the dying sun in the fleeting twilight of the Tropics. On either side of the river, boats with their sails fluttering in the wind, slowly proceeded towards the shores. The young man nestled closer to the water-line. The temple-bells announced the hour of the evening prayer —Arati!

The youth with his uncontrollable passions, wild imagination and romantic dreams, listened to the alluring chime of the temple-bells. Many a timid maiden bathing in the Ganges smiled at the maiden moon; and the innocent youth interpreted their smiles in his own favour. The nymphs were immersed in the river up to their necks, gurgling saline water in youthful glee. Their Saris (a linen or silk cloth, a yard in width and five yards in length, that covers the body of a woman is called a Sari in the province of Bengal) which clothed their bodies, were wet and became transparent, clinging to their ivory forms and accentuating the loveliness and the haunting charms of their sensitive contours. Depending on the holiness of the sacred river, they loosened their Saris

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and let them float on the water. But the blasphemous waves of the Ganges danced up and down their comely bodies and exposed their supple limbs, their well-formed and heaving breasts and slender waists; and thither the youth turned his longing eyes. Rama was his name!

The moon had risen high in the evening sky and the temple-bells pealed deeper and longer tones. Rama pictured in his mind the well-shaven priests with their saffron robes, the sandalwood paste on their brows, chanting Sanskrit incantations; novices blowing through conch-shells; temple-girls holding brass trays, studded with hundreds of oil-lamps, before the mute idol—the idol whose silence spoke more forcibly than the fanatic outcry of an inspired prophet!

Then gradually the chimes died away and Rama awakened to reality. Where were the coy women with their sly smiles; the newly-wedded brides in their just pride—the vermillion mark along their parted hair? Where were the laughing courtesans seeking absolution for their terrestial sins—and even while temple-bound, finding diversion with their lust-laden eyes? Where were the Maharajah's guarded wives whose

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modest manners did not suggest the crimson love-life within the confines of their curtained chambers? They were gone, the scene had changed, and the boats peacefully floated on their anchors!

Rama felt a pang of unfulfillment in his heart, but wherefore he knew not. In quest of an answer he turned his large dark eyes towards the distant horizon. He felt a wantonness possessing him. Nothing seemed complete without—without what? He hardly knew! The sleeping emotions of this man had opened their hungry eyes, but the man knew it not. And that was Rama. All he realised was how painfully he missed the evening nymphs and the untold pleasures they might have given him.

The pale moon sprinkled her silver rays on the undefined horizon dimly lighted by the campfire, far, far away. There the gypsies had pitched their tents for a week, so they said. There was light in every boat and the river seemed to balance so many thatched huts on either side. The ferry-men lighted their small ovens in their boats in order to have at least one peaceful meal after the day's toil. And from one of the boats, plain-

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tive music came floating towards Rama. Someone was playing on a flute!

The mellow note of the flute struck an unfamiliar chord in Rama's heart. A veil was lifted from his eyes and he saw a woman's face beckoning to him. Maya, they called her. Standing in the moist grass Rama wondered if it was she for whom he had felt so keen a desire in his breast. Like one in a dream, he made his way towards the cottage that sheltered the little rose-bud. He had played and fought with her ever since their childhood days. And he had always been the task-master, because he was a few years older than she. But to-night Rama saw a different scene. To-night Maya's face had a peculiarly sensuous appeal! A mellowness behind her drooping lashes seemed unique; her dimple that beguiled a womanly shyness was new to him. He found himself possessed with an overwhelming passion for Maya.

Anxious to overtake her in the garden, all by herself, Rama quickened his pace. With his head raised towards the sky and arms swinging indolently, he hurried on. Oblivious of his surroundings, he plodded his way through the

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beaten path that rent the bosom of a corn-field in twain, when some one touched him on the shoulder.

"Where are you going, my child?" asked the stranger.

"Going—going—" muttered Rama, fumbling for words.

"Poor boy, the blessed curse of Prajapati (the god of love, who usually brings about a happy union) is on you," remarked the man sympathetically.

"I wouldn't call it a curse if I were blessed with it," said Rama with a boyish smile.

"I am glad to learn that you are secretive. It only proves that you are very much in love with the queen of your heart."

"May I have the good fortune of knowing with whom I am talking?"

"A name doesn't convey much, unless we know how to bear the name. But since you have expressed your wish and as it is in my power to fulfill it—my name is Gopal. May you be successful in life." With these words, the man left and continued on his way. The young man looked back again and again at the vanishing

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figure of Gopal. What a remarkable mentalist that man must be, thought Rama within himself.

In the rear garden of her home was Maya, plucking flowers for the evening Arati of the Homestead Idol. And wading his way through the ears of corn, Rama managed to have a glimpse of his Maya!

Behind the mound that lay between the cornfield and the cottage, Rama stood gazing at his beloved. The moon was smiling benignly upon the earth and the whole world seemed enraptured. And in the reflected rays of the Lady of the Night the blemishless oval face of Maya looked like the chiselled marble image of Doorga, the goddess. Her raven hair floating down to her knees enhanced the glory of her complexion. The shadowing lashes that clothed her gazelle-like eyes gave a dreamy touch to her countenance. Her well-shaped aquiline nose manifested the pride of her virginity. The ivory teeth set in coral gums sparkled in the moonlight. Her supple neck seemed more delicate than that of a swan. Her lithesome figure, artistically eclipsed by a Sari, showed the beautiful curves only when the wind mischievously played

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on her body. Her heaving bosom cruelly dissembled the advent of maidenhood in her, she, the child of yesterday! Maya looked like a dream-goddess in an enchanted garden.

Diligently, one by one, she had picked the flowers and filled the basket. She pressed a blossom close to her bosom, and with her head uplifted, looked at the crescent moon that gradually climbed higher and higher. With her gaze fixed towards the starry heavens, Maya stood like a virgin statue, overwhelmed by the desire to dedicate herself to the sweet mystery of the senses that quivered for appeasement.

Rama had also lifted his head towards the sky. The figure in the moon looked like Devi, the goddess, caressing him with outstretched hands. As one in a trance, Rama turned his gaze towards Maya. His unruly locks kissed his ears, inflaming him. He passed his hand over his broad forehead, as if trying to remember the dream of a past love. The firm chin in his boyish face showed an unusual determination. The slanting corners of his visionary eyes manifested an inborn voluptuousness in his character. Standing high above the ground with his head thrown

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back, and his broad shoulders emanating vitality, Rama looked like a passion-drunk god. This devouring desire lurking within his beautiful eyes attracted Maya's attention. In rapt adoration, she gazed at him again and again. And as he lowered his head, and looked at her, she stole glances at him with averted eyes.

Gently, very gently, Rama came nearer Maya. Her eyes were lowered. She knew he wanted to feast upon her, yet she did not raise her head. Her tongue was motionless; her lips were sealed. Rama was amazed at the change. Only recently she had stepped into womanhood. And yet she was completely changed. Too bashful to meet even Rama's eyes!

"Maya," whispered Rama.

But no answer came. She lifted her eyes and looked into his, only for a fleeting moment. And then, she turned her head, suppressing her newly aroused desires.

"Maya," he addressed her again, "the homage of your prayers knows no beginning, knows no end. Day by day you gathered flowers unto your bosom only to lay them at the feet of that mute idol which your forefathers anointed as

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the Homestead Deity. But tell me, to what unresponding creator of Heaven and Earth do you offer your prayers and why? Does life appear to you to be a withered oasis in a sandy desert, that you try to propitiate the sterile gods?''

Maya smiled a mischievous smile!

''I don't understand you,'' observed Rama embarrassed.

''We women grow so quickly!'' she remarked.

''There is not the least doubt about that,'' he said. ''You have changed completely, changed beautifully, changed surprisingly. Standing on the mound I was looking at you, and the more I looked, the more ethereal you seemed. When you were plucking flowers with your delicate fingers, slowly threading your way through the jasmine beds, I was admiring the graceful movement with which you carried your precious body. Oh, Maya, you looked like an Apsara who dances before the Devas in the Himalayas. Perhaps, I am the first mortal to be blessed with such an ethereal scene.''

She drank deeply of his words. There was no flattery of a passing lover in his voice, but

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ecstatic rapture of a sincere youth, who, unknown to himself, was a poet and a lover.

"Maya," he continued, "what unknown grief resides in the sanctum of your heart that you pray so devotedly?"

"It is not a grief, but only a wish," she said. And for the first time Rama saw through the veil.

"I know, I know," he said, "it is the traditional prayer of woman. She wants Shiva to send her a prince from the regions beyond the clouds; she longs for a prince—"

"You seem to find it amusing to read a woman's mind."

"Then it is true, eh?"

"Who does not long for a dream-god for her husband?"

"Maya, what is your dream and how does your dream-god look?"

"That is my secret."

"Ah, but a woman can never foster a secret unless she tells it to some one."

"Then promise in the name of your mother that you will never divulge it to anybody!"

"I do promise," he said.

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"My bridegroom," she said, "will not come from the clouds, but he must be able to outwit the greatest wit in the world, Gopal Bhand."

"The jester in the court of Rajah Krishna Chandra?"

"Yes, but remember your promise. And only then shall I give my virgin body unstintingly."

Rama felt that the world underneath his feet was moving in a circle. Who had not heard of Gopal Bhand and his astounding feats? But fortunately Rama was not aware of many. Yet the little that he knew of Gopal, was enough to rob him of his dream—that some day he would possess Maya. His silence smote her heart. She was sorry she had uttered those words and yet she dared not take them back. She came closer to him and said, "Let us go in, mother is expecting me." She waited for him to lead the way.

"Forgive me, Maya, but I am not coming. Please convey my humble salutations to your parents. May God give you a long life; may you live for ever."

With these words, Rama left her. Slowly, he passed the mound and still more slowly he penetrated the heart of the corn-fields. Maya stood in

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the garden. Her eyes followed the slowly moving figure that gradually vanished into the landscape. The moon hid her face behind the clouds and Rama was no longer to be seen.

"Why didn't I ask him why he would not come?" thought Maya to herself. "Wasn't my longing for him strong enough to overcome pride and prudery? Why did I let him go? Would not the gods have accepted my sacrifice at the altar of love?"

She approached the house, the only cottage in a neighbourhood of thatched mud-huts, and mud walls. The little home that Maya's father had built recently was conspicuous by its singular structure. The frame was made of expensive teak-wood, filled in with meshed bamboo fibres. The roof was red with newly built semi-cylindrical tiles. The plinth was made of stone, with Ashlar facing. The cottage was octagonal in shape. A wide verandah coiled around it. Palm and date trees with their swinging branches fanned the home with pleasing breezes even during the hot summer. In the rear of the cottage was a flower-garden loved and tended by Maya.

The moon was still hidden behind the clouds.

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The tall palm trees in their sombre majesty stood motionless. Maya looked like a silhouette of a goddess in an open expanse, and her cottage stood like an aged temple that had weathered æons of civilisations. The golden bangles above her elbows glistened in the darkness of the night and her star-shaped pendant earrings mocked the stars in the heavens.

"Why did he go away?" asked Maya of the limitless sky.

The lapping waves of the distant river spashing against the shores broke the silence of the night. But their rhythmic monotony which came floating from far away sounded in Maya's ears like the curse of an aged hermit on a benighted sinner.

Where was he?

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CHAPTER II

Before the newly bathed sun had come out of the Ganges and risen above the horizon, Rama made his way towards the shore. He alone, who since the beginning of creation could read man's thoughts, divined what was in Rama's mind. Maya must not know anything about his plans. Even the impossible could be possible if Shiva willed it so. Even Gopal Bhand could be vanquished, if the omniscient Devas used Rama as their tool. With the dawn of the winter morn, he was bound for the capitol, where Gopal shone as the unchallenged Deity in the court of Rajah Krishna Chandra. Migratory birds from Siberia on their way to the Chilka Lake (in Southern India on the border line of the Madras Presidency) cast a shadow on the clear water of the rivers and on the green fields. A battalion of an aerial army without a commandant—in quest of warmth—too freedom-loving to seek shelter in villages, too dignified to fly low. High above

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the proud heads of palm trees, higher than the crests of the temple-spires, even higher than these, they flew towards their abode in winter—Chilka!

Rama looked back. The small island of Navadwip was still sleeping—no hum and bustle in the market-place, no chime of the temple-bells, no incantations from the school of Sanskrit literature—only the spirited cocks announced the epilogue of the fourth Prahar (Quarter of the night). Nearing the shore, he saw a few aged women come out of the Ganges. Counting their Rudrakkha rosaries they were limping back home.

Very near the water-line was a small boat, without any shade or cabin, oared by a middle-aged man, who had already washed his hands and feet. With a Neem-Twig between his jaws (used as a tooth brush, fresh every morning) the ferry-man looked at Rama. "The sun must have risen in the West this morning," thought the man, "that I should get a passenger so early." He began to chew the Twig quickly and beckoned to Rama to step into the boat. With the brushy end of the Neem-Twig, the man rubbed

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his teeth and gums vigorously and then threw it into the river.

Dipping his cupped hand in the river, the ferry-man took some water and rinsed his mouth. He repeated the process several times, until his mouth was completely clean.

"Namashkar, salutations, can I do anything for you?" asked the ferry-man standing before Rama, with folded palms.

"If you have no urgent work in Navadwip, please take me across the ferry."

"If you do not think it ill of me, I would like to light my Hookah (water-pipe) before I put the anchor off the strand," said the ferry-man very politely.

"Certainly, please do so."

The ferry-man cleaned the stem of the Hookah with a narrow iron rod and then removed the ashes from the Kalki (an earthenware pot, fitted on to the top of the water-pipe, devised to hold the tobacco). He removed the milk from the cocoanut shell and filled it with fresh water. A little lump of tobacco and molasses beaten together was placed in the Kalki and a piece of charcoal on top of that. Then,

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cautiously, the ferry-man lighted the charcoal and rounding his lips, gently blew on it. Gradually the tobacco began to smoke and the ferry-man pulled at the mouthpiece.

The small shops on the shore were still closed, the bamboo awnings hanging on the bamboo hinges! The ferry-man lifted the anchor and plied the boat with one hand, while his left hand was holding the water-pipe.

"Babu (gentleman), are you worried over anything?" asked the man.

"Oh no, but I am anxious to meet Gopal Bhand," answered Rama.

"Then you are going to Rajbari."

"Yes. Have you ever met Gopal?"

"Yes, the moving wheel of Fortune brought him once to me. My life has been blessed by his presence."

"Will you kindly tell me something about him, if you happen to know anything interesting?" requested Rama wistfully.

"This unworthy man will fulfill Babu's wish; whatever the servant has, will belong to his master," answered the ferry-man.

"I am only a boy," said Rama, feeling embar-

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rassed at the profuse modesty of the ferry-man.

"But a Babu, all the same," said the ferry-man, and began to smoke heartily. The shops appeared smaller and smaller and the migratory birds looked like a dim patch of cloud.

"The days are gone," resumed the ferry-man, "when the Rajbari had only the external pomp without any life within. A hundred elephants and a thousand horses were always ready to serve the Rajah and his retinue. But the court was lifeless, until one ominous morning a modest-looking man appeared before the Rajah. Since that day, people in the Rajbari have learned to laugh.

"After attending to his official duties Rajah Krishna Chandra felt tired one evening. Even the fond caresses of the Ranee (Queen) were not soothing enough to relieve the mental tension from which the Rajah was suffering. So keen was his anguish that the studied seductiveness of the lovely Queen made no inroads upon his preoccupation. Time after time the Ranee, secretly beloved by all and cherished and sought after in adulterous minds, appeared in the Maharajah's chambers, loosely clad, perfumed with sensuous

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scents of the East and pleaded for favours to still the cry of her flesh. Ranee, whose sensuous body was known and longed for in the courts of four continents; whose languorous desires burned for the attentions of noble youth; whose essential warmth required the continuous love fuel that all were consumed with the desire to replenish, to sacrifice all for her. Even this pulsating Ranee could not absorb the Rajah sufficiently to lose himself in her. So he sent for Gopal Bhand, the fountain of eternal wit, the dispeller of cares and sorrows, he who could soothe the worried brow of the Rajah, and who would cause him to forget for a while his eternal burdens. It was not long before the jester presented himself before the Rajah.

" 'Maharajah, your servant awaits your orders,' said Gopal.

" 'Will you do what I ask you to do?' inquired Rajah Krishna Chandra, when the Ranee retired to her private chambers.

" 'I am willing to give my life for you, beyond that the command must come from you,' answered Gopal.

" 'Nothing as extreme as that. I only seek

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diversion. Can you tell me if you are able to make an unclad but virtuous maiden embrace you?'

" 'The order from the great Rajah will receive as great care as a crown on my head.'

" 'It is not an order,' added Krishna Chandra, 'and there is one condition, you are not to tell any woman that I had commanded her to embrace you.'

" 'Your court jester has never used a Royal order as a means to aid him to carry out his plans. Gopal Bhand is the son of a Lion who kills tigers with his wit,' observed Gopal with dignity.

" 'You talk like a warrior, but tell me how you are going to do it,' asked Rajah Krishna Chandra.

" 'Ah, that is a secret.'

" 'But remember, I command you, she must be a virtuous woman and not a courtesan.'

" 'That I shall know how to manage.'

" 'But she must not be your wife, either!' remarked the Rajah in a half-apologetic and half-facetious tone.

"Doorga! Doorga! an audacity that only behooves a Rajah; but a poor man loves his wife

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too well to expose her to public shame in order to satisfy a Rajah's caprices.'

" 'Do you wish to insinuate that your master, the Rajah, would expose his own wives for diversion?'

" 'It is only known to you and to Kama Deva (Cupid) but not to me. However, may I know if there are any more conditions to your fantastic wish?'

"I think I need not elaborate any more on this matter; but I want you to know that I must be a witness to this occasion.'

" 'I shall deem it a great favour if Rajah Krishna Chandra graces the occasion by his hidden presence. May I know if your Royal Highness has any idea about this virtuous woman?'

" 'Most decidedly. A paragon of beauty in the prime of her youth; a rosebud that has not yet opened her petals; honey that has not yet been tasted. A fragrance that has not yet been dispelled; a bud that has not yet been blown upon by any breeze. A luscious flower that has not yet been plucked.' commented the Rajah.

" 'Ah, and as the rose-bud opens her petals, I drink deeply into her fragrant youth and our

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Maharajah stands by only as an appreciative onlooker,' observed Gopal Bhand with a smile.

"Though anxious to retaliate by witty repartee, Rajah Krishna Chandra failed to find suitable words that befitted the occasion.

" 'May sleep enfold our Rajah in its wings until I am enfolded in the arms of a timid maiden,' wished Gopal Bhand; and with folded palms he offered salutations to Krishna Chandra, humbly bowing his way out to the door."

"Day after day went by, yet no one saw even the shadow of Gopal Bhand near the Rajbari. A weird pall of grief seemed to pervade the palace, because Gopal was not to be found. It was simple to obtain a courtesan's caresses; however, to persuade a reputable lady of a noble family to embrace a strange man evidently became an enigmatic problem even for the court-jester of Krishna Chandra. A sparsely clad paragon of beauty wilfully embracing Gopal before the Rajah! That was a problem which the Devas (gods) alone could solve!

"One evening, when the clouds were smiling

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with prismatic colour, Gopal was slowly walking through the King's high-way—very thoughtful, yet alert. He had his knotted walking stick under his left arm. Unmindfully, he turned his eyes towards his left and saw on the verandah of an old house, a venerable man smoking his Hookah.

" 'Rajen Babu, I forgot to take the dust off your feet, Shiva alone knows, for how many eventful days,' exclaimed Gopal approaching the verandah.

" 'Welcome, my son, welcome,' greeted the old man, 'I was just thinking of you.'

" 'It is my good fortune to have your blessings even when I forget to come and touch your feet,' said Gopal, removing the dust from them with his hand, and then touching his own forehead. The dust from Rajen Babu's feet, painted on Gopal's brow, remained as an indelible blessing.

" 'You are sad, Rajen Babu,' remarked Gopal.

" 'Yes, I am sad, because I cannot help the poor maiden Malati in any way. You pull the hookah, while I relate to you the sad tale,' said

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Rajen Babu offering the water-pipe to Gopal Bhand.

"The shadow of night was fast approaching the verandah. The milkmen were driving the cows home. Here and there a bullock-cart was hastening away from the temples. Veiled women in their thatched cabins were stealing longing glances at the King's high-way. And Gopal was enjoying the smoke in the benign presence of a venerable old man.

" 'I am going to relate to you,' began Rajen Babu, lowering his voice, 'but I must not shout, the story of Malati, the half-blossomed lotus flower. You know her, for he who has seen her once, never forgets her. She is so beautiful. Since I am her next door neighbour, I am compelled to notice everything that happens in her house. Pray stop me if I happen to speak aloud, because I do not want Malati's mother to know that I am discussing her daughter with you. If I must tell the truth, Malati is compelled to marry a wealthy old wretch because it is her mother's wish. I had never known before that money could be such a curse. I could not even dream of requesting Malati to marry any one,

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merely because of wealth. It is like putting a pearl necklace around the neck of a monkey. And poor Malati has no brother to whom she could tell her sorrows. If I were wealthy I would gladly give Malati my whole fortune. My call may come from the other world at any moment.' Rajen Babu was too moved to speak. He looked pathetically at Gopal. Malati was in her cradle when her parents moved to their new house next to Rajen Babu's. He had seen her grow every day until she had blossomed into womanhood. Her lithe form was a delight to behold. Firm, supple limbs, delicate milky white breasts, a body radiant enough to enflame the soul of youth.

" 'This delicate child,' resumed Rajen Babu in a husky voice, 'would faint even if you struck her with a flower. And to think that she will have to marry an impotent man whose only lure is gold. All the mohors (gold coin) in the world would not buy Malati if she were my daughter. My son, tell me, can you save her?'

" 'I can,' said Gopal Bhand emphatically.

" 'How, how?'

" 'I want to see her first and then the rest will follow. When can I see her?'

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" 'If you tarry here for a while, she will be back from the market-place shortly. Her mother is not feeling well these days—she is bed-ridden, I presume—I can manage her. Malati will be able to spare a few minutes. You tell her how you can save her, will you, my son?'

" 'In the name of Doorga, I vow to you that I shall save Malati from this wealthy reprobate. My blood grows hot to think that a man could stoop to marry a maiden of his daughter's age,' uttered Gopal with his right hand uplifted to the sky.

"In the early part of the fourth prahar of the night, Gopal left his house without disturbing his wife. The moon was slowly sinking behind the horizon and a grey mist floated over Tribeni. He quietly opened the garden gate and stepped out on the highway. Without turning his head to the right or to the left, he walked ahead, as fast as his feet would carry him. He had tramped a krosh (two kilometres) before the dawn greeted the horizon.

"Nearing the mango grove that lay beyond the temple of Kali, Gopal slackened his pace and

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tried to count the number of mango trees he had passed. He took a few steps towards the left and then he stopped. He rubbed his eyes in order to see clearly. Gopal parted the branches of some small plants that grew in abundance around the stems of the mango trees.

"Smiling, Gopal looked into the bush and then traced his way back. No one had come to bathe in the river as yet. The shore was quiet and the boats were floating on their anchors. He walked forward and before he had gone far he saw Malati standing on the broken bank of the Ganges.

" 'Blessings, my child,' said Gopal before she had time to greet him.

" 'Pranam,' said Malati.

" 'You have nothing to fear and there is not a soul around. If you do as I tell you, your wish will be fulfilled before the sun's rays kiss the spire of Kali's temple.'

" 'I shall do whatever you want me to do,' said Malati looking at Gopal with pensive eyes.

" 'Pray go down and bathe in the Ganges in order to purify the temple in which the soul resides. And in the meantime, I shall offer hom-

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age to Prajapati,' said Gopal Bhand in a serious and dignified voice.

"While Malati was preparing herself for the holy bath, Gopal confided his plans to the concealed Rajah.

"Malati immersed herself in the clear water of the Ganges with the one hope that she would be saved from that wealthy dissipant who wanted to buy her body in marriage. The waves kissed her Sari and made it transparent. Rajah Krishna Chandra from behind the bushes watched breathlessly the bewitching figure of Malati. The transparent Sari in its vain attempt to clothe Malati made her more fascinating. As one in a trance, the Rajah was admiring her, when Gopal began to utter prayers to the deities.

" 'Let all the Devas in the Himalayas and the fool in the mango bush witness Malati's beauty in the early dawn.' Her body glistened in the sunlight as if bedecked with myriads of pearls, lending her a rare seductiveness, of which she was unaware.

"Rajah Krishna Chandra was trembling with rage, but he dared not emerge from the bush or utter a single word. Trying to hide her shame,

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Malati stood shivering before Gopal, who asked her to follow him. They went a few steps towards the mangro-grove, when, unknown to her, he plunged his stick into a bee-hive. Before she knew what was happening, buzzing bees in mad fury came rushing towards Malati. Gopal was already a few steps away from the honeycomb. Poor Malati in her panic came running towards Gopal and threw her arms around him. 'Save me, save me,' she cried in agony, clinging to him. He ran with her towards the mango bush. Espying the Rajah, Gopal smiled to himself while Malati tried to hide her face. She realized that they had been watched by this man behind the bush.

" 'Malati, do not be afraid,' said Gopal Bhand, 'Rajah Krishna Chandra himself is here to grant you the boon you deserve.'

" 'May Rajah Krishna Chandra live for ever,' said Malati by way of greeting.

" 'Maharajah,'' said Gopal, addressing the King, 'this little rose-bud is being given away in marriage to an old wealthy miser who is known as a stupendous idiot, simply because her mother is old and needs money. We know the King-

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dom of Ram Chandra is dead and gone, but Rajah Krishna Chandra is alive and always ready to avenge the wrongs of inexperienced maidens. Gaze upon her, feast your eyes upon her delicate beauty and then decide her fate.'

" 'Assuredly I am alive,' said the Rajah, 'and no one is going to force her into a marriage. Go and find out how much her mother needs for her old age, and I shall supply her with it, and it will be my command that Malati will choose her own bridegroom.'

" 'May the Devas shower flowers and sandalwood on thy lips, Maharajah,' said Malati and Gopal in one voice.

"The Royal Court of Rajah Krishna Chandra was in turmoil. The Royal coach drawn by eight horses was glistening in the summer rays of the sun. Waiting for the Maharajah's orders, which would take them to a distant land, eight horses with saddles and two elephants with Howdahs on their backs were waiting in the spacious compound of the Rajbari. Granite pillars with carved arches guided the way to the dais on

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which the ivory throne was placed, studded with gems, shone magnificently.

"It was midday. Rajah Krishna Chandra occupied his throne to mete out justice to his subjects. Two footmen stood on either side of the throne and waved Chamars (fans made of ostrich feathers) on the Rajah. The Mantri (Prime Minister) sat next to the throne on the Rajah's right hand. Brahmin pundits and astrologers were engaged in forecasting the ominous days of the current month. Visitors from distant lands waited to be presented to the Rajah. And in a corner, like a figure trying to hide in the darkness of the night, sat Gopal Bhand.

"Rajah Krishna who knew Gopal better than any one else, understood that the court jester had some mischievous idea in his head. He beckoned to Gopal and asked him to come near the throne. The Rajah's order was carried out without delay, but still Gopal was silent.

" 'Why are you so reticent?' asked Krishna Chandra.

" 'I was wondering if I ought to describe the romantic episode of the morning to your loyal subjects,' said Gopal very seriously.

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" 'Have you gone mad?' asked the Rajah in a frantic whisper, trying to silence Gopal.

" 'I do not think so. On the other hand, Rajah Krishna Chandra did not buy my silence,' observed Gopal.

" 'Very well, the treasurer will give you five hundred gold mohors as soon as you present this written order. Will you be satisfied with this amount?'

" 'Krishna Chandra's servant is always contented,' said Gopal rising from his seat. He wended his way quietly from the palace thanking the nude maiden for his newly acquired fortune.''

The ferry-man took the oars off the water and with a bamboo pole in his hand stood in the centre of the boat. Cautiously and yet quickly he drove the pole into the mud so that his boat could be slowly driven into the strand. He pulled out the pole and again touched the bottom of the river to control the speed of the boat. The island of Navadwip across the river was still sleeping when Rama alighted from the dingee.

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CHAPTER III

The broken walls of an old pre-historic fortress were visible in the distance. In the past, they were ramparts, but those days are no more! The scorching heat of the sun, though presumably mild in the winter months, was pouring on the tired head of Rama as he sat on a boulder to rest his weary feet. He had forgotten to bring an umbrella when he left Navadwip, and no Bazaar was in view, either. Not far from the boulder there was a cool spot under the shade of a banyan tree. Rama rose from his seat and slowly proceeded towards the tree. He wished some bullock-cart or a horse-wagon would pass so that he would be spared the pain of walking four kroshes. But he did not know that he had not taken the King's high-way to the capitol. Dreaming of his Maya, he had entered upon an old path which was seldom used by people who plied between the capitol and Navadwip.

The aged Banyan must have seen several centuries, thought Rama as he approached the

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chosen haven of rest. Long stooping branches had penetrated into the sub-soil and spread new roots that transformed these branches into stems of new trees. The main trunk stood like a gigantic pillar, that seemed to support the sky. Around this mammoth trunk was a gnarled bench that encircled the body of the tree. It was Nature's bench hewn out of the trunk, through several centuries of weathering.

Two wayfarers had already opened their bundles and spread out their provisions. Espying Rama, one of them gulped down the food quickly and asked, "What is your caste?" Rama smiled and pulled out his sacred thread from under his koorta (upper garment). The man was pleased to learn that Rama was a Brahmin; perchance, if he were not a Brahmin, the wayfarers would lose their caste by such close proximity, while eating.

In a near-by pond, Rama washed his hands and feet, having left his shoes under a tree; he also splashed water on his ears and then came back to the cool shade. He opened his bundle and began to eat heartily. He had a few moas made of puffed wheat and molasses, a few bananas, with

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some luchis (pan-cake fried in butter), some fried egg-plant and potatoes. The way-farers could not see Rama who was completely eclipsed by the trunk of the tree. He was still eating when the other two men walked towards the pond to drink water. Rama was thinking of the fair face of Maya. He hardly realised what he was eating; his mind was still hovering in Navadwip.

After finishing his mid-day repast, Rama drank water to his heart's content; washed his hands and mouth and came back to his favourite retreat. The two men who guarded their caste with their lives were now smoking hookahs. They invited Rama to have a puff at the water-pipe and asked him his name.

In the course of the conversation, Rama found out that he had taken the wrong road to the Rajbari. Bipin, one of the wayfarers, told him very emphatically that he could not reach his destination before sun-set even if he persistently walked all the time. One could seldom expect to see a horse-wagon on that road and the bullock-carts were rare. Whereas, the direct route through the King's high-way would take him to the Rajbari in half a day.

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It was a bad omen to return after going half-way on a journey. So, Rama resolved to have a little rest and then begin to walk towards the court of Rajah Krishna Chandra. And if Fate blessed him, some kind of a conveyance might appear from an unknown corner of the world. Reclining against the trunk of the tree, Rama closed his eyes.

Bipin and his friend were discussing their own grievances and Rama could not help listening to the conversation, unless he plugged his ears with cotton-wool, as is said in Bengal. They were astrologers, enjoying permanent or rather life-long annuities from a wealthy Zemindar (land-holder possessing vast estates)—so Rama discerned from their talk. And at the present moment they were on their way to Navadwip. The Zemindar's son was old enough to have a wife, so they were entrusted with the sacred duty of finding a bride for the boy. Rama became interested in their conversation and tried to grasp every word that came from the other side of the trunk.

"Look at the audacity," said Bipin to his friend, "look at the audacity of the Zemindar Babu. The boy is not worth a broken conch-shell

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and yet we have to find the most beautiful bride on this side of the Ganges, for this jackass. Just think of it. What has he to be proud of, can you tell me? He has neither looks, nor other qualifications; and as for his scholastic attainments, you could not get an alphabet out of him, even if you strike his head with a bomb.''

''Please do not make me laugh on a loaded stomach,'' requested the other astrologer, trying to suppress his laughter. The poor fellow had eaten up to his neck.

''My wisdom fails,'' continued Bipin, ''when I think of the audacity of Zemindar Babu. But since we eat his salt, I presume, we must discharge our duties. Ah! here is a serious circumstance which we have not as yet considered. Supposing the father of the bride wants to look at the bridegroom before we consult the stars and determine the day of the marriage—what happens then? To look at Zemindar Babu's son, one feels like vomiting.''

''Brother, why begin to yawn in anticipation of the dawn? We have not failed yet. As a matter of fact, we have not seen the bride yet,'' observed the wise astrologer.

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"Ah, but anticipating is just as good as seeing, even as smelling is as delicious as eating. I can eat one thala full of rice without anything but salt, when my wife fries shad in the kitchen. When more than one person has said that Ranjit Babu's daughter is the most beautiful woman in the island of Navadwip, I am not going to scratch my head over it."

"I do not recall her name!"

"Maya, they call her."

It affected Rama's ears like a thunder clap would a sleeping child. His eyes became blood-shot. He rose suddenly. He felt the world whirling about him. Every trunk of the huge banyan tree looked like a demon, whose lapping tongue was hungry for human blood. The sky looked dim. And the four words, "Maya, they call her," hammered in his ears. He strained his ears to hear more about this Zemindar's plans to secure the most beautiful bride for his son. What clever men these astrologers were, thought Rama to himself, to be able to locate definitely the most beautiful rose-bud, on this side of the Ganges. Poor Rama did not stop to think that there were women far more dazzling than Maya;

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because to him, she was a goddess, an angel shorn of her wings, a Devi denied of Swarga (Heaven)!

So, these astrologers were going to see Maya and explain to her father, Ranjit Babu, that he should consider himself blessed that a son of the great Zemindar was willing to give Maya protection, in his precious manor. And Ranjit Babu was not likely to brush the proposal away with his left foot and far less would Devi, Maya's mother, ignore such a magnificent match. Ranjit Babu belonged to a well-to-do middle-class family, and as Brahmins are seldom wealthy, he was not likely to lose such an opportunity. Besides, he could easily demand a large dowry. Everything seemed to go against Rama. His only hope was Maya! He cursed himself for not having told Ranjit Babu and Devi who he was, but it was too late now.

Years ago, when Rama was a boy, his father had asked him what he would like to do. And Rama had expressed his desire to go to Navadwip to study Sanskrit at the feet of learned scholars. Moreover, he told his father, that he wanted to go to a school of Sanskrit literature, as a poor boy.

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His father's chest inflated with pride when he listened to the heavenly and modest words of his son.

A few days later, Rama had left his father's house, the Zemindar Bari, after taking the dust off his parents' feet. Rama's father was a wealthy Zemindar, near Mayapur. He left the horses, cast a lingering look at his favourite elephant, paid his salutations to the high-priest, and made his way to the island of Navadwip with a Brahmin pundit. While studying in the Tole, Rama accepted only a small allowance from his father and no one but the pundit who had initiated Rama into scholarship knew anything about his heritage. Ah, but that was years ago and the pundit died with his secret. Even Maya would be surprised if Rama were to tell her who he was. But it was too late. He would not go to tempt her with money after that bold challenge of hers to outwit Gopal.

Again Rama listened to the astrologers' discourse:

"It is our good fortune that Zemindar Babu does not know anything about Ranjit Babu's daughter Maya. Otherwise we would be in a

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predicament if we failed to persuade this old man to marry his daughter to this lowly human beast. I hope I do not live to see the day when he will be the Zemindar. He would turn the whole estate into a battle-field.''

''So long as Bipin lives, no Zemindar will dare to violate any laws of Manu (the Hindu Moses) or of Khana (the woman astrologer whose predictions were considered infallible) and if you live another twenty years, you will see that Bipin does what he says,'' remarked Bipin in an authoritative tone.

The conversation of the astrologers became intolerable to Rama. He left them without even bidding them farewell and began to walk as fast as his feet would carry him. He went wherever his two eyes led him.

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CHAPTER IV

A thick jungle and tall evergreen trees, but no trace of human habitation was to be seen, nor could one discern the smell of lions or tigers. Only spotted deer with branched horns roaming fearlessly in God's enchanted garden. Here and there were traces that wood-choppers had left. A small rivulet ran through the bosom of the jungle. An ideal place for a hermitage, thought Rama as he waded his way through the shrubs. Fearlessly pressing through the forest Rama noticed a mound, which looked more like an ant-hill from a distance. Nearing it he saw feeble smoke rising from behind the small mound. Curiosity goaded him to the hidden danger.

Before a cave in the hillock was a Sadhu (a mendicant) seated on a tiger-skin with nothing but a loin-cloth around his waist. A small impromptu log-fire erected by propping four logs, feebly flickered in front of the Sadhu. The heat was not sufficient enough to warm even a mouse, in an open place like that. But the fire was being

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constantly fed with fresh twigs by the immobile mendicant.

Rama watched the scene in silence. The Sadhu was smoking ganja (hemp) in a kalki (an earthenware device to hold ganja) and the fire was intended to supply charcoal night and day. From the flame the Sadhu derived the requisite warmth for his body, and from the ganja his divine inspiration and his sense of renunciation. What a sublime power!

"Why are you so worried, my son?" spoke the Sadhu. "You were born with a royal mark on your forehead, seldom found in a Brahmin. You will be as fortunate as a Rajah, though you will never sit on a throne. Fate has chosen you as her own favourite. But Kama Deva (Indian Eros) is playing with your emotions. Love is eluding you now; but, remember, when a woman tries to avoid you, she loves you. It is too early for you to grasp the meaning of my words, but you will appreciate their significance with the advent of time. You have lost your way now because you are disturbed by turbulent emotions. Now, let me guide your way to the Rajbari. Keep on walking wherever your eyes lead you,

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and in a few moments you will be on the King's high-way. Shanti! Shanti! Peace be with you. Now go.''

The Sadhu closed his eyes and pulled at his kalki as if in a trance, and then the thick pungent smoke seemed to emanate from him. Rama looked at the strange figure of the emaciated Sadhu, who had never oiled his hair, nor cut the nails of his fingers and toes. Like a basket of dried jute, his hair sat on his head, and his cracked skin was chalky white. Rama could almost see the pulsation of the Sadhu's heart-beat through his transparent skin, and yet the man possessed supernatural powers. Fearing their penetration, Rama walked away from the Sadhu and dared not look back. No sooner had he turned to his right, than he again saw the clear sky and the winding road. For the first time he began to question his sanity. Had the Sadhu hypnotised him? Was he dreaming or was it actually a man-made road? Quicker than his jumbled thoughts ran his tired feet.

There! There was the King's high-way! Bullock-carts, horses, horse-wagons, elephants, pedestrians, pilgrims, wayfarers, and mail car-

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riers! The whole scene had changed! Where was the jungle and where the Sadhu? The log-fire and the mound, where were they? Rama pinched himself in order to assure himself that he was not dreaming.

"How far is the Rajbari?" asked Rama of a man who was resting under the shade of an Aswatha tree.

"About a krosh from here," answered the man. "Look, there is the banner fluttering in the wind. I think it is on the first gate-way to the Rajbari."

Rama began to calm down when he saw the banner and heard the rattling of the carts. He stretched himself on the sloping embankment of the King's high-way. A tired mind, tired feet and a puzzled head; a broken heart in hectic suspense and a soaring ambition of a buoyant youth who is being consumed by the dream of a mad passion.

Would he ever hold Maya in his arms? Would he breathe the scent of her hair? Could she love him? Would he behold her well-rounded limbs and satiate his hunger in her firm breasts? Would her yielding body still in him

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the yearning to become fused within her, even as one body and one soul?

The outskirts of the Rajdhani (capitol) were glimmering before his eyes. The lure of the grandeur of the Rajbari dragged him along the King's high-way Yet, once in a while Rama tried to decipher the enigmatic words of what the Sadhu had told him. But more often he would become fatalistic by whispering to himself that the stars alone could decide his fate and choose his bride. But the next moment he would wake from his passivity and walk faster towards the Rajbari. He must meet Gopal Bhand himself and try to outwit the court-jester. Rama was thankful for at least one thing, Maya had not left her fate in the hands of match-makers, but had had the courage to stand by her own choice. An intense longing, which is the third stage of a love-lorn man, possessed Rama like a nightmare envelops a guilty soul. The next stage would be either emaciation or rejuvenation, so meditated Rama.

Music floated towards him on the winter breeze. A woman's voice accompanied by a Saringi (a stringed instrument) was announcing

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the eve of the twilight. The faint beats of Tabla (drums) were also heard. She was now singing a dance-song heralding the spring. Leaving the King's high-way Rama followed the music and the woman's voice that seemed to be hidden in a by-lane on the left.

An unknown voice in an unknown land; yet dear, very dear to a weary soul, because she breathed the olden melody of love. The sky presented a dramatic picture for a poet. The sun had been hidden behind a dark mass of clouds, but now they were slowly melting away, and through the broken window of the clouds the blushing rays of the parting sun rushed to meet the welcoming sky. The variegated rays reflected on the crest of the Rajbari, the towering banyan trees, and the spires of the temples that rent the bosom of the sky.

Imperceptibly, as by a magnet, Rama was being drawn towards the beautiful stone-house on the way-side. On the flat roof were banisters fashioned after an old fortress. The arched portals designed in the Mogul taste had the delicate finish of Mohamedan architecture. The window curtains slanting down, preserved the proverbial

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modesty of the women who glanced from behind them and yet allowed the cool breezes to come and go. A front verandah with a sloping shade of tiles made the house unusually conspicuous. Granite pillars supported the verandah shades.

Rama stood nearby and listened to the music. Intermittently a woman's laugh and men's exclāmations broke the monotony of the Tabla-beats. The woman who sang untiringly was a master musician. She would begin the song in a slowly enticing cadence, and then throw the song into Jalad (quicken the tempo) and thus test the accompanists on the saringi and the Tabla.

The night was fast approaching and yet Rama stood spell-bound on the way-side. The melodious voice had died away within the four walls of the stone-house and in its place came the Jhankar of the Sitar (sitar—a stringed instrument with seven strings; Jhankar—the tone produced by striking the five main strings). The rhythm of the music pulsated in his blood. Then he heard a new voice, more powerful than the former but less melodious, accompanied by the tinkling of the jingling anklets. She was singing and danc-

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ing, as Rama could hear by the pattering feet.

A man appeared on the front verandah. He noticed Rama and came towards him. In the semi-darkness he looked closely at Rama and then with a hearty smile he spoke, "What good fortune! Is it really you, Rama Babu?"

"Who are you?" asked Rama. "I seem to recall your voice but not your face."

"Brother, it is not your fault; this moustache and beard hide my identity completely," observed the man.

"Is it Biren, with whom I studied for years in the Tole at Navadwip?" asked Rama.

"Strange! I did not know I was so changed. Tell me, did you lose your way and so happen to find yourself in the Rajdhani?"

"No, Biren, I have some urgent work to do. How differently you look! But why did you grow the shrubbery on your face, Brahmins do not grow it. You look more like a Mohamedan."

"It is best to look dignified in this city. But let us forget my appearance for the present. How long have you been in this place?"

"I have just arrived," said Rama. "And

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when I heard the strains of beautiful music, I became captivated and stopped to listen. I was so tired.''

''Why not come in? This is not Navadwip where you have to be afraid of your neighbours.''

''I do not understand you,'' apologised Rama.

''These women sing for money, and if you have a few copper coins, just step in for a few moments. Gold coins, of course, will buy anything you want. Rama, you are still a boy. Let us go in.''

Rama was introduced to the musicians and the singers as a new-comer in the Rajdhani and was cordially welcomed by the women.

A spacious room was completely covered by a Persian rug. A white linen sheet was spread on the rug and fairly covered it. Floor cushions and large bolsters, called Takias, were propped against the walls for the visitors and the inmates to lean against. Rama and Biren sat in one of the corners sunk in velvet cushions. ''Pau,'' ''Supari'' and ''Attar'' placed on a tray were presented before Rama (Pau is a cone-shaped betel leaf stuffed with betel nuts, catachon and lime; supari is the Bengali name for betel nuts;

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attar is the quintessence of perfume). Rama took the offered Pau and a drop of Attar in cotton-wool, which he placed in his right ear. From the way he was greeted with Attar, Rama realised that the musicians were from the North and that the women belonged to Bengal. The man on the Saringi spoke Hindustani, and knew only a few words of Bengali; the Tabalchee barely spoke Bengali in broken accents. But the three women spoke Bengali and Hindustani equally well.

And to his great surprise Rama was told that even these song birds were from the North. How beautifully they spoke and sang in Bengali! The nightingale whose melodious voice had held Rama spell-bound near the verandah came near him and asked in polite tones if she could sit by him.

"May thy slave sit at thy feet?" she murmured.

"The slave always awaits the Queen's pleasure," observed Rama returning the compliment.

"Then we are linked by the slavery of mutual admiration," she remarked, nestling closer to him.

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"And the unseen link is stronger than iron-chains," was Rama's reply.

"Rama Babu must have read some Persian literature," she slyly suggested.

"Yes; and only a jeweller can appreciate a genuine jewel," Rama complimented. "And may I know by what name mortals call the nightingale of the North?"

"Janaki is my name," she answered.

The second singer, who, in Rama's estimation had a stronger but less melodious voice than that of Janaki, had just finished her song and the dance was now in quick tempo.

Rama smiled at his own foolishness. He should have known the moment he had entered the room that the Natis dancers were from the North, because their costumes were distinctly in Northern India style. But everything was so sudden, so new, so unexpected that Rama was slow in adjusting himself to the circumstances. Moti, the dancer on the floor, was arrayed in a transparent costume. Toe-bells and a pair of Mauls around her ankles tinkled as she glided. Gauze pantlets half concealed her body from the waist down to the ankles. A fully pleated skirt

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of Benares silk studded with flowers of hand-embroidered gold hung in folds about her undulating body. The Ghagra had the shade of the dying rays of the Sun. A transparent bodice embraced her breasts like a vine clinging to a banyan tree. This enhanced the half-revealed beauty of the rosy tips barely visible; a gold necklace fitted tightly around her throat accentuated the voluptuous curve of her supple neck. And as she danced her whole body swayed with the rhythm of the music. Each limb had its independent rhythm, and yet was in harmony with the resultant curve that her body was creating.

Moti, towards the close of her dance, stood before each man, as if trying to woo his love; and the man in return placed silver coins before her dancing toes. Rama followed suit even more generously than any one else, to the great satisfaction of his school-mate Biren.

During the intermission, conversation ensued on music, old composers, different instruments, and especially on the thirty-six standard melodies in the various provinces of India. And very cleverly the men showered compliments on the learning of Janakai and her compatriots.

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Later that night Biren whispered into Rama's ears, that these artists from the North had made it their profession to entertain privately as well as publicly; that once in a while Janaki, Moti and their friends would take a fancy to a man, who if wealthy enough, could indulge in a night of forgetfulness. And Biren pointed out to Rama that Janaki had already been impressed by the young new-comer. So if Rama had the means to celebrate his first night in the Rajdhani, Janaki would most likely play her part.

Rama thanked Biren for his kindness yet he failed to understand what was really meant, until late that night when Biren adjourned to another room with Moti. Then only did Rama realise where he was. Courtesans in the garb of singers! And musicians paid to play their role! Songs and dances were a mere prelude to intimacies that were to follow, thought Rama within himself. His forehead became wet with perspiration. What a predicament! He could not possibly blame Janaki if she had expected him to stay for the rest of the night. But how could he? His whole world was concentrated in one person, Maya. The very thought of caressing and fond-

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ling Janaki seemed distasteful to him in view of his pure love for Maya. But was it really distasteful? Did not his blood flow warmer at the mere thought of the swaying Janaki? She had danced her way into his heart and his arms ached to embrace her seductive body. She would give herself to him unstintingly and joyously, without any conditions or tasks.

Maya was not likely to tell every one who asked for her hand, to outwit Gopal Bhand, or she would not have required Rama to deem it a sacred secret. It was nothing but a clever way of telling him that he was not worthy of her. "Not for you, O Bulbul, the Rose of Gullistan," thought Rama. And those astrologers, he had met under the banyan shade, Bipin and his friend—they were not going to give up Maya without clinging to the very end. If he had only told Maya or even Ranjit Babu that he was the eldest son of a wealthy Zemindar, things would have changed in his favour. But it was too late!

"Have I not pinned my heart to a phantom love?" thought Rama to himself. "Maya is no longer a child. She is a woman now. And if it is true that women mature earlier than men she

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should have known that I love her with all my heart. But then, it is not always true, that love invokes love. Perhaps her heart is given to some one else.'' His thoughts were interrupted by Janaki who came close to him. She placed her tired head on his bosom. The musicians had left and they were alone in that spacious room. She unfastened the tiara from her hair; the veil that covered the upper portion of her face and the upper portion of her body slowly fell to the floor. The texture of her skin was fascinating. Her velvety complexion seemed to be an intermingling of vermillion and ivory. Rama was tempted to caress her bare arms and sip the honey from her lips. Her closeness danced through his body like old wine and intoxicated him. But he loved Maya! Where was she? Rama cursed himself for his weakness and cursed Biren for his knavery, and yet when he meditated upon the situation he could not blame Biren for guiding him to this abode of pleasure. He then consoled himself with the thought that the adventures of youth are overlooked and forgiven. Why not embrace the pleasures of the night?

Janaki was unusually beautiful and as she

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reclined on his lap, with her eyes closed and her arms relaxed, Rama could only think of her as a lovely creation of God. And yet he could not forget the fact that she was a courtesan. He raised her limp body and gathered her closely to his breast. She slept like an innocent maiden in her lover's arms.

For the first time he realised that it was past midnight and that he had no place where to spend the night. He could hear no foot-fall in the by-lane nor noise from the high-way. Silence pervaded the roads. He could rest in a Dharma-Shala (free rest house) if he only knew where it was located. He knew more about the man in the moon than the plan of the capitol. While Rama was thus meditating, one of the musicians noticed the beautiful Janaki asleep in Rama's arms. Without a word, he entered Janaki's chamber, and brought a Cashmere shawl. Like a loving father he covered her with the shawl, extinguished the lights in the Baitak-Khana (parlour), where Janaki and Rama lay half-reclining in a corner, and then left the room after paying his salutations to Rama. The light in her bed-room was also extinguished. He showed

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Rama how to light the oil lamp before he finally retired for the night. He entered his room and found the drummer-boy snoring like a horse. The Saringi-player lay half-reclined on his divan, with the mouthpiece of the brass water-pipe between his lips; because he never slept at night. The lives and the jewellery of the women were entrusted to his care. He was their body-guard, accompanist and servant. Every courtesan in India has a man like this Saringi-player to protect her and nowhere but in India are the courtesan's life and propery so safe.

Rama had also fallen asleep, lulled by the rhythmic breathing of Janaki. He felt the gentle rising and falling of her breasts; her body so closely pressed against his and he was content.

In the fag end of the night Janaki opened her eyes with a shiver. She felt Rama's arms around her. Poor Rama was fast asleep. She pressed her smooth hands over his face and stroked his hair. He was cold and so was she. Janaki slowly withdrew herself from his arms, tip-toed into her bed-room and brought two heavy blankets. She stretched Rama's huddled body on the mat and placed soft cushions under his head; then she

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covered him with the blankets. This awakened him; he opened his eyes, and in the bright moonlight that sifted through the latticed window he saw Janaki. For a moment he was puzzled but then he realised where he was. It slowly dawned on him that he had been sleeping in Janaki's Baitak-Khana with the maiden close in his arms.

He turned towards her and smiled, "I remember now, how I came here. On entering the capitol, I heard your melodious voice and stood spellbound in my rapture. Biren brought me in. Have I overstayed my welcome?"

"Pray be at your ease," said Janaki, holding his face in her hands. "Perhaps you are ashamed to be here. I know you are not like the others who come here for only one purpose. You despise us, do you not, noble Brahmin?"

"No, no, I do not hate you. I shall never hate you," said Rama with sincerity. He held her close in his arms. "You are cold, pray permit me to put that blanket around you. Or, perhaps, you would like to go to bed. You must be tired, Janaki."

She crept under Rama's covering and sat leaning against his body. He felt her breath on

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his face. The fragrance of her body was upon him, but he still resisted. The courtesan appreciated the nobility of this man.

"Shall I leave you and go to my room?" asked Janaki, bringing her mouth close to his ear. He felt her cheek on his, like the soft caresses of the dew drops on the petals of a half-blossomed flower. Rama gathered her face in his hands and passionately pressed his lips to hers. She clung to him and rested the whole weight of her body on his. He drew her closer to him, entwined her with his limbs and buried his face in the softness of her pale throat. Then suddenly his whole body began to tremble violently.

"Janaki," he said with a sob, "I desire you, but I must leave you. Pray forgive me, but I must go." She remained silent and unsatisfied, while her respect for this man at that moment was more than she ever had for any one. Janaki was of delicate character, though only a courtesan. Rama fumbled for his knitted bag. He placed a gold mohor in her hand and said, "Just a little token of gratitude for giving a night's shelter to a benighted wayfarer." With tears in her eyes, she bade him farewell.

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In the silence of the night Rama left the house and Janaki stood behind the verandah-door, watching the fading figure of the man she had learned to love. Tears rolled down her ivory cheeks, and for the first time she realised that a courtesan could not share in the joys of this world outside of the confines of the Rajdhani.

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CHAPTER V

Janaki's kiss was still on his lips! Unknowingly, unexpectedly, like the sun bursting through the autumn clouds, it had come on him. The first warm kiss of love. She had been much kinder to him than the occasion warranted. And above all she had not sold herself. She had not tried to entice him with her physical beauty, nor had she come to him as personified temptation. And yet she was hungry for his embraces. Rama was the first man whom Janaki had wanted to kiss. There was more than passion in her lips; there was ardour, longing and complete abandonment. Could Maya have given anything more in her kisses? Perhaps Maya's kiss would be more deliciously innocent in its appeal than that of Janaki.

And he had given her only a gold mohor for all her kindness; it was more than kindness! The very fact that Janaki had not tempted him into a night of revelry was worth more than a thousand gold mohors. A courtesan, who lived on her

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beauty, had treated him as her ideal Love God! And he had left on an impulse, afraid of her charm, afraid of himself and afraid of loving her!

Rama veiled his head with his wrapper and made his way towards the King's high-way. On a mango tree an owl sat hooting at him. The howling of the jackals, speedily stealing out of the night, was heard from a distance. Dark, black figures soaked in oil were rustling in the bush on his right. Rama became afraid of the oil-soaked thieves. They might waylay him any moment, and throw his body in a cave or in the nearby river. He trembled with fear.

Fate alone would decide the plan of his life, thought Rama, and began to walk in a steadfast pace. A grey mist had enveloped the atmosphere and the moon was sinking behind the palm trees. The morning was not far off.

A large and old stone house stood by the way-side. Rama thought he heard an uproar and on listening carefully he discovered that at least twenty people were snoring in unison. "Doorga! Doorga! after all I have found the much-coveted

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Dharma-Shalla (free half-way house),'' he exclaimed with relief. He climbed the verandah steps and pushed the front door which yielded easily to his pressure. He saw a roomful of men sleeping on the floor! And he added one more to the number. Immediately, the goddess of sleep embraced him in her arms and made him forget the world.

After a refreshing slumber he proceeded on his way.

The ferry-man could not have given a more vivid and accurate description of the Rajbari, thought Rama, as he entered the court of Rajah Krishna Chandra. Gopal Bhand was hidden behind the portals of the main entrance, so he was told. Looking around, Rama found the famous court-jester. Lo and behold, it was the same man whom he had met in the moonlit field, on his way to Maya's cottage, days ago. Rama was disappointed to see such an unpretentious, modest and quiet man in Gopal; but at the same time he noticed a mischievous and witty glitter in his eyes.

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An amusing tragedy awaited the Rajah's decision, so Rama seated himself next to Gopal without attracting any attention. The court-jester recognised him immediately and said in a low whisper, "The world is very small, after all."

"Namashkar," said Rama with folded palms.

"Let us listen to this interesting tale," spoke Gopal, and looked ahead. The Kotawal (policeman) delineated the evidence of both the defender and the complainant in an austere tone.

"A beautiful unmarried woman was bathing in a pond long before the sun's rays had kissed the leaves of the banyan trees. She had not noticed a youth engrossed in catching some Rohit fish. Hidden partially amidst the shrubs, he was keenly watching the fatna (the bait) which might sink any moment. Unfortunately, the young woman had not noticed how near to the bait she swam; and as an ill omen would have it, instead of catching a fish, he hooked the bait in her right thigh. The woman screamed in pain. The neighbours came running to the scene. Her beauty was damaged, and the man lost the golden chance of catching a few fish which would be worth several silver coins."

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He should have left the pond as soon as she entered the water; but lost in his dream he had not noticed her until the bait jumped. This evidence was received as a modest lie by every one present in the court room. The decision of the Mantri (Prime Minister) was against the fisherman, and Rajah Krishna Chandra, in his proverbial magnanimity, fined him a gold mohor and ordered the city treasurer to give the young woman ten mohors. Rama liked the judgment and felt great respect for Krishna Chandra.

"May Rajah Krishna Chandra live for ever," said the fisherman, and proceeded towards the door.

Without moving from his seat, Gopal beckoned to the young man to come to him.

"Namashkar, Gopal Babu," said the fisherman.

"Namashkar," returned Gopal, "but listen to me before you leave. In future when you go out with an angling rod, please make it a point to pull high."

"As you say," observed the man, and left the court.

Rama requested Gopal to tell him something

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about the formalities of the court, but the court-jester smiled and said that a gentleman was above formalities or conventions. That was very good news to a young man who had never seen a Rajah in his life.

"Why are you sitting so far away from the throne?" asked Rama.

"Because I am sad. Of course you do not know what I went through last night. You know, yesterday morning, Rajah Krishna Chandra announced a prize of two hundred mohors to be given to the man or the woman who could stand all night in a pond with the body immersed in the water, up to the neck. And everybody knows how cold the water is these days. Even a thief would not risk this adventure; but I did. And this morning I looked like a leper and yet, as you can see, I am quite healthy and unaffected by cold. But the saddest part of it is that the noble Rajah would not believe that any one could survive a night-long bath. So he began to ask me several questions and in the end when I told him that in a distant house I could see the light of an oil lamp, Krishna Chandra concluded that the heat from that lamp kept me warm and

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saved my life; therefore I did not deserve the reward. Now, tell me if you have ever heard such a preposterous thing in your life. And yet I cannot forget my suffering in that ice-cold water, when I had a comfortable bed and a wife to keep me warm.''

Gopal Bhand felt relieved after telling Rama what he had gone through just for the sake of two hundred mohors. He took a pinch of snuff and closed his eyes for a timely inspiration. Rama admired the silver snuff box of the court-jester and felt tempted to take a pinch.

''Maharajah,'' said Gopal in a deep voice, rising to his feet, ''will you grace my house, this evening, with the dust of your feet? It is the special wish of my beloved wife that Rajah Krishna Chandra dine in her house before the lagna (moment) of the full moon begins.''

''I am honoured,'' assented the Rajah.

''And will the Prime Minister and the Treasurer also accompany Maharajah Krishna Chandra?''

''Certainly we will,'' answered the Prime Minister and the Treasurer in one voice.

''And I hope you will come too,'' said Gopal

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to Rama, who was quite unprepared for such an honour.

Too anxious to meet Rajah Krishna Chandra and his officials, Rama forgot to look for a night's abode. He was longing for the evening to come, so that he could walk towards Gopal's house. And when he realised that he had no house to live in; no clothes to change into, he consoled himself with the thought that the Dharma-Shalla was there. And Janaki would not turn him down, since he had enough mohors in his waist-band. The very name of Janaki sent a thrill through his body, though it was in the name of Maya he was following the shadow of Gopal Bhand.

Surmising that Gopal Bhand, having lost two hundred mohors, was sure to play some subtle joke on the Rajah, mischief mongers followed the trio at a distance, until they entered the garden of Gopal's house. Krishna Chandra, the Prime Minister and the Treasurer saw Gopal feeding a small fire under a palm tree and Rama supplying the twigs. The mob waited outside.

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"Gopal, what are you doing and who is this young man?" asked the Rajah.

"Maharajah, this is Rama Babu, the great Sanskrit scholar from Navadwip." Rama was taken aback on hearing Gopal's introduction. He did not even dream of Gopal knowing anything about his literary attainments.

"Maharajah, your humble subject begs to offer his salutations at your feet," said Rama.

"May you be happy, Rama Babu," blessed Rajah Krishna Chandra. "But Gopal, what are you doing?"

"Preparing the grand feast," answered Gopal.

"Are you possessed by any ghost?"

"If you look up, you will believe my words," said Gopal.

Krishna Chandra saw a small earthenware jar hanging from the topmost branch of the palm tree under which Gopal was feeding the fire. The Rajah smiled.

"Fool, how can you ever expect the heat of this small fire to climb so high and cook the rice in that jar? It is about thirty cubits high!"

"Maharajah," answered Gopal, very, very

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humbly, "if the heat from the oil lamp in that distant house last night could supply enough warmth to save my body, there is no reason why this blazing fire will not cook the food I am anxious to prepare for Rajah Krishna Chandra."

"I confess I am defeated, you will have your deserved two hundred mohors," said the Rajah.

Rama was astounded at Gopal's audacity, yet he realised that it was the audacious wit in the court-jester that Krishna Chandra admired so highly. Gopal began to stir up the fire vigorously and hardly paid any attention to the King. Moreover, he seemed so serious over the imaginative meal that even the crowd outside the garden gate roared with laughter. Realising the hopelessness of having any evening meal in Gopal's house, the Rajah addressed the cook with super-imposed dignity and said, "Gopal, I shall come back when the food is prepared and I presume I will have to be born again to earn that pleasure."

Gopal turned round, bowed to the Rajah and again began to stir the logs. Rama grasped the situation and followed Krishna Chandra without a word.

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It was too late to look for a house to live in or investigate if he had any friends in the city. Dharma-Shalla was the only alternative, but it was too early to sleep, and Rama was not in a mood to listen to the philosophical discussions of the pilgrims and the temporary visitors in the Rajbari. Until late at night, he could not expect to hear anything else in the Dharma-Shalla. A lover loves to pray to God but he loathes discussions, and Rama was no exception to the rule. He felt a strong urge to see Janaki, to hear her voice, to hear her sing, to apologise to her for his rude behaviour and the next moment he hesitated to go because he felt he also craved her embraces.

While the self-analysis was going on, his feet were carrying him towards that conspicuous-looking house, where lived Janaki, the first woman to have had his lips. Rama's mind was in great turmoil. On one side the strong determination to outwit Gopal, and on the other, the unquestionable desire to embrace Janaki. On one hand an unreciprocated love for Maya; and on the other, a love that could find an immediate response. Yet both involved a tremendous struggle on his part. To win Maya he must outwit

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Gopal, and to win Janaki he must be prepared to incur the social ostracism of his family, which would follow his amour with a courtesan.

"Rama Babu, I was just thinking of you!" He looked around.

"Biren, Namashkar."

"Namashkar, but you are the most amusing man I have ever met in my life. On opening my eyes this morning I could not find a trace of your whereabouts. It brought tears to my eyes when Janaki told me in a pathetic voice that you would not stay with her. If you only knew how fortunate you were to have gained her love."

"What do you mean, Biren?"

"To tell you the truth, Janaki came here only recently and though every young man adores her, she is studiously indifferent to all of them. She would sing for anybody but that is all, and we had come to the conclusion that she was not for sale in any other capacity but singing, until last night she looked at you with lovelight languor in her eyes. And you, like a hermit, unmindful of the tremendous joys of the flesh, threw her love away. You alone know what is in your mind, but to think that you could neglect

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such a passion flower. Was it a moment's bashfulness or sense of mock morality?''

''Neither,'' answered Rama, ''to-night I am going back to Janaki. Do you want to come with me?''

''I was going anyway. But tell me, Rama, have you found any place to stay?''

''Not yet; for the present, Dharma-Shalla is my home.''

''How unkind of me; pray forgive me. Last night I forgot to ask you where you were staying and this morning I could not find you. Do you see this house? This is where I live and you are going to be my guest as long as you remain here.''

''Biren, I shall not be able to partake of your hospitality,'' observed Rama.

''Rama, if you feel such a chasm existing between us, then I cannot force you to stay with me; but until you find a suitable abode, I will not allow you to sleep in the Dharma-Shalla. You are going to stay with me. And I hope that your Brahmin's moral code will remain unsullied by our association.''

''Please do not take it in that light,'' apolo-

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gised Rama. "I am very grateful to you and I hope some day I will be able to be of some use to you."

On either side of the road were beautiful examples of varied architecture. A cluster of houses where the Mohamedans lived, had the distinct feature of the Mogul design—miniature minarets and domes curved into the front walls of the houses. Next to these pretentious structures were a row of thatched huts with cement or stone plinths and wood frames. And then marble houses fashioned after the Buddhistic styles. A magnificent picture of variations. Biren was indolently looking at the distant sky and Rama was trying to keep pace with him.

"Let us go to this sweetmeat shop and partake of some food," suggested Biren.

"I was just going to ask you if you would join me at a repast," said Rama, who felt embarrassed at being tardy in the invitation.

The proprietor of the sweet shop was frying some cakes and his son was frying patals (vegetables found only in India). Sweetmeats made of curdled milk were displayed in marble plates in a rear rack to avoid the street dust. Rama

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ordered ten luchis, a quantity of fried vegetables, and various other delicacies, but Biren having had his meal just before he left his house, ordered sparingly. Rama managed to offer the money before Biren had the time to think of it. While the former was heartily eating the luchis, Biren was slowly chewing his favourite vegetables. Both of them finished eating at the same time. The young son of the proprietor brought two tumblers, made of black stone, and poured water in them for the two respectable Babus.

Rama realised that Biren was not in a mood to go to the Bose-para quarter, where Janaki lived, before late in the evening. To Rama, the experience seemed more like an admixture of joy and temptation, but to Biren it was a part of his daily routine.

On the road to the Rajbari was a spacious meadow. Huge evergreen trees bent low with modesty stood encircling it. Gravel paths fantastically curved divided the meadow into different sections. Here and there a bed of roses surcharged the atmosphere with the aroma of the Orient. Bulbuls hidden in the thick foliage of Jhan trees sang their love melody to the sky and

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to the land! And an isolated bird called "Ban-Katha-Kao," so named after the monotone that it utters, which resembles "Bride, please talk," was repeating its request untiringly: "Bride, please talk." A tremor ran through Rama's veins. He would employ the very same words to Maya, perhaps in his own way. And small birds found only in Bengal sang in a quick tempo, "Chokhe-gallo, chokhe-gallo," "I lost my eyes, I lost my eyes." But the birds never lost their eyes.

Biren looked at the limitless blue sky. Far, far away an isolated star was throwing a faint ray into the world. Then suddenly another star came into view, and gradually countless myriads appeared. He sat down on the smooth lawn and Rama followed him in silence. That blue canopy, infinite and mysterious, was merely an illusion, thought Biren. What lay beyond those stars nobody knew. Was there a paradise for the afflicted ones who had never known joy in their earthly lives?

"My friend," spoke Biren, "I must open my heart to you, or I shall lose my mind. You may wonder why you and I are so different; why I

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seem to be so much older than you; why I, a scholar who had studied Sanskrit at the feet of the learned pundits in Navadwip, could condescend to spend his nights in a house of pleasure where human flesh can be bought and sold for silver coins. I would not blame you if you thought that I was possessed by demons.''

''Oh, no, I do not think ill of you,'' said Rama in a convincing tone. ''It seems that every young man must pass through a period of dissipation, which somehow helps to balance the passions of his manhood. Besides, association with courtesans has its compensations.''

''Rama, you are only quoting what you learned in books, while I am telling you what I have experienced in life. It is true we need experience of every kind to know life as it is, but no learned man would haunt the house of a courtesan as consistently as I do. Have I no manhood left in me? Am I not capable of loving a virtuous woman? Do I not crave for the embraces of a wife? To all outward appearances I am a licentious man according to the moral codes of our community. I hope I am not tiring you.''

''No, Biren, you are not tiring me and I want

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you to forgive me for having misunderstood you,'' added Rama.

''My friend,'' resumed Biren, ''I do not know whether you remember Chamelli, that half-blossomed rose, whose fragrance is still upon me, whose shadow constantly dances before my eyes. She used to come to our school with her mother who supplied milk to the celibate pundits. She was the only woman that the pundits would trust within the four walls of the Tole. Do you recall her now? It was at Chamelli's feet that I had laid my heart. No one knew anything about it. Kusum Davi, Chamelli's mother, used to arrive with the milk long before the sunrise, long before any one in the Tole had left his bed. She would place the pail of milk in the garden and slowly depart. It was only when she came late in the mornings, that her daughter would accompany her. Chamelli was only a child then and so was I, although somewhat older than she. The romantic verses of the poet Kalidas created an ideal love in my youthful dreams and in Chamelli I realised fulfillment.''

''I knew nothing of your friendship for Chamelli,'' observed Rama.

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"If you did," said Biren, "I would call myself a poor gallant, for a lover's love is more secret than the miser's gold buried in the plinth of his bed-room. Such was my adoration for Chamelli. As years went by she grew up into maidenhood, and many a morning she herself would fetch the milk to the Tole. And one morning I noticed her. Every one was still sleeping; I entered the garden and saw Chamelli placing the pail of milk in a corner. When she was about to leave she saw me. Immediately I motioned to her to keep silent. She understood perfectly and too realised that if we were surprised in that situation, her reputation would be injured. So without a word she proceeded towards the door and in that ominous moment I grasped her hand and gently brought it to my lips. With imploring eyes she begged me to release her. I said nothing, but devoured her with my longing eyes. A few moments of bliss and she left."

"And then?" asked Rama.

"And then, I had to wait for seven long days before she returned. You see, she was going through a mental struggle herself. If she had

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hated me, she would have never come back; but she could not stay away from me any more than I could from her. The moment I saw Chamelli, I entered the garden gate and waited for her. I took the pail from her and placed it in a corner. All this time she gazed at me. Her eyes seemed to ask the question, "What do you want of me?" I took her into my arms. She did not repel me and I folded her tenderly to my bosom. I pressed her close to my fast-beating heart and I placed my soul on her rose-petalled lips. Our hearts pulsated with one desire. I kissed her again and again until my lips were dry."

Biren stopped for a moment. His voice was husky and he could not proceed. His eyes glistened with unshed tears. The tragic epilogue of the tale was yet to be told, but his voice failed. And Rama who was still a victim of Kama Deva (Indian Eros) felt keenly for Biren. He could imagine the unspoken words, the fatal end. The pale moon was rising above the horizon and Rama wondered if Fate was more fickle than the moon; she at least was constant even in her inconstancy. After some moments of meditation, Biren resumed his story.

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"Knowing what a great risk we were running, I gave up meeting her in the garden, but late at night would steal into the jute fields and wait for her. Usually, I waited in vain, because she dared not come out in the brilliant moonlight. At the close of the waning moon, she met me every evening. We were so madly lost in each other that we had never asked any questions. I knew her name and she knew mine, and that was all we needed to know about each other. The fleeting moments were too precious to be lost in conversation."

Rama listened intently to every word Biren uttered. Far more pathetic was this tale of romance than his own could ever be. It was stirring the sympathetic chords of Rama's heart.

"Her eyes spoke in silence all she had to say," continued Biren, "her pulsating breasts resting on my chest told me what her heart wanted to tell, and the warmth of her body imparted to my veins how intensely her whole being longed for me. With our lips pressed closely and enfolded in each other's arms, we did not feel the mist of the night; we only knew that we wanted each other. The more I pressed her to my heart, the more

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passionately she clung to me, until our bodies were fused into one. We were sick with love, and then under a new moon beneath the blinking stars we gave vent to our overpowering passion.''

Crowning the chirping of the evening birds, and voicing the silent melody of the pensive lovers, the cruel bird ''Ban-Katha-Jao'' burst out in the sky—''Bride, please talk.'' It came like a bolt from the blue on Biren and Rama. They turned their heads towards the tree in which the bird had built its nest.

''Next evening,'' said Biren, ''I waited for my little rosebud, but she did not come. A week later she appeared and stood before me like a ghost. In a broken voice she asked me if I were noble enough to take her away with me, because only my presence could save her, otherwise she would die of loneliness. I consoled her and wiped her tears away. I told her that nothing was more precious to me than her sweet body. Then she began to weep, and I sat dumfounded in the jute field, trying to decipher this sudden and unexpected outburst. I thought they were tears of joy, but I was soon disillusioned. She

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sobbed on my bosom and said that she belonged to the second caste. You can imagine how I felt. Never for a moment had I thought that she was anything but a Brahmin. If one were to judge her unjustly, one would say she was to blame; since she knew that I was a Brahmin. But romance knew no reason, when my hot breath intermingled with hers and my tender touches seduced her.

"Rather than bear the anguish of solitude, Chamelli preferred to join a roving band of gypsies. I had been roaming like a mad man to trace her. More than three years elapsed before I finally found her."

"So you did find her?" exclaimed Rama.

"Yes, and when I met her, she was Moti, the courtesan and dancer!" uttered Biren with a deep sigh.

"The same Moti I met last night in Janaki's house?"

"The same Moti, and I still love her!"

"How cruel, oh, how cruel!" murmured Rama.

A haunting silence pervaded the twilight. The temple bells chimed the hour of Arati. A

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muezzin from a minaret in a distant mosque sang the call of evening prayer. The birds winged their way into their nests. Tears, like dewdrops, moistened the eyes of Biren; and the two friends remained gazing into the spangled Heavens, high above!

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CHAPTER VI

The moon hid her face behind massive clouds and a veil of darkness spread over the meadow. The silence of the night became oppressive, and gradually the darkness deepened into an ink-black canopy. The breeze played through the swinging branches of the Aswatha, and the banyan trees created a weird melody of uncanny horror. The howling jackals provided the music of the sombre night.

"Yes, caste ruined our lives," spoke Biren with a deep sigh. "I do not know whether caste is good or bad for the Hindu, but I do know that it wrecked the lives of two young people and drove them both into a brothel. The tragedy is that Chamelli, or Moti, as she is now called, immersed in her life as a courtesan, is no longer capable of sexual loyalty, although she may honestly want to remain monogamous and to be true to me. But her mind can no longer control her body. I do not reproach her conduct, for when

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she realised that we could not remain together and left with the gypsies, it was best for her peace of mind to bury her past. Besides, morality, after our night of abandon, was a huge farce to her. Since our great love was not considered pure enough to induce the priests to sanction it, then what harm was there in a path leading to a countless number of lighter loves? She was already considered an outcast. That there was issue from our mad union, I suspect. What happened after, I do not know. She would not tell me of her own accord, nor have I the courage to ask her. Now, try to imagine my agony when she told me that she took my love as from one of the many who came to her for a night of revelry. She dared not recall the bygone days when she was the innocent Chamelli, and I was an ardent student in the Tole. But above all, the unchangeable fact remains that she now is callous to the deepest emotions of human flesh, and it is a physical condition beyond any remedy. My Chamelli, whose blushing smile was once sweeter than the blush of the dawn, and now she is Moti, a laughing courtesan in a house of harlotry, and still I love her.''

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Like a demon's laugh in a haunted house, Biren's delirious laughter reverberated in the open meadow. "Laugh, Rama, laugh, life is a comic enigma," exclaimed Biren with his arms thrown up in the air.

"Pray have faith in the name of Narayana and He will listen to the cry of your heart," said Rama, trying to console his desolate friend.

"They say Heaven is beyond the Himalayas and Hell is under the seven seas, but I assure you that Hell is lurking within us."

Without a word Rama helped Biren to his feet and taking him by his arm, led the way out of the meadow. A tense silence pervaded the night.

Janaki's song was ringing in the air. The jhankar of Sitar accompanying her voice enhanced its richness. And the slow beat of the Tabla playing eight-eight time created a dreamland for the two love-starved men, who stood on the verandah like two benighted pilgrims. Biren was leaning against a granite pillar, while Rama tried to catch a glimpse of Janaki's face through the cashmere curtains behind the portals. What heavenly enchantment lay in the human voice, he

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marvelled. To-night he realised why he had not liked Moti's voice the first time he had heard it, because Moti was the soulless Chamelli. She lacked the ardour of Janaki's longing! Perhaps some day even Janaki would lose her delicacy and become just as callous to human sentiments as Moti, calculating and sensuous, giving herself in intimate embrace to any stray possessor of a mohor.

The drawing-room was full of men, but to Biren it looked empty, because his heart was an anguished tract of emptiness! The silken cushions were spread around the room in a close circle, and the men sat spell-bound as Janaki swayed languorously to the accompaniment of her voluptuous song. Slowly, Rama and Biren approached the door as the song died away. Moti, attired in a gauze tunic with her lovely limbs gyrating in a complicated dance, welcomed Biren with a cordial smile, while Janaki grew pale and instinctively covered her exposed breast when she saw Rama. Why had he returned, and why not, since he had money enough to pay for her songs? Would he stay until the dead of night, as he did on the previous visit and then

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leave her mecilessly and abruptly? Janaki cursed herself because she could not remain indifferent to him. To-night she would not devote her attentions to him alone but she would lavish her favours upon all men. She took the tray filled with pau, supari and attar, in the palm of her right hand and sat before each man for a few moments to allow each one sufficient time to choose what he craved. In exchange for some pau and a little attar, each man placed a few silver coins on the tray, so great was their appreciation of her charm. Janaki accepted their money with a gracious smile and a salaam. Rama and Biren continued to watch Janaki, oblivious to the musicians' request to grace the occasion by sitting in the centre of the circle. As time passed, several more men entered and the Saringi player brought more cushions in order to form an outer circle. But Biren requested him to place some against the walls for those who wanted a Hookah so as not to create unnecessary smoke before the singer. Rama welcomed the proposal and settled himself comfortably in a corner. With set jaws Biren stood like a statute. Moti's smile was eating into his heart like so many cobras!

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Finally, Janaki approached Rama and asked him why he preferred to be alone. He did not utter a word, but only gazed at her with the longing of a hungry lover. She drooped her lashes before his gaze. Without a word, she put a sweetmeat between his lips, rested her fingers there for a fleeting instant and then left him. He remained immobile, his gaze following her lithe movements.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the room. Some dignitary had arrived. Everybody paid him the highest homage by words and salutations. Rama asked Biren who this man was. No one seemed in awe of him, but all felt highly honoured at his presence. He was a tall handsome man with olive skin and jet-black hair, firm chin and smiling eyes, suave and gentle. When Rama repeated his question for the third time, Biren whispered to him: ''This man is an enigma to us all and at the same time strangely fascinating. Nobody knows his name and everybody has failed to ascertain from what part of India he hails, because he speaks five languages fluently and equally well. We do not even know what his caste is.''

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"I wonder who he might be, for he looks like a Brahmin," muttered Rama.

"We do not know, no one can tell. He wishes to be known only as the Traveller."

"And yet everybody respects and welcomes him?"

"Assuredly, even Rajah Krishna Chandra worships this man. You remember the old saying—'a king is respected only in his own kingdom, but a scholar is respected everywhere.' "

"But, Biren, do you mean to say that even Gopal Bhand has failed to decipher this strange puzzle?"

"Gopal never tried, and he would not, unless Rajah Krishna Chandra offered a handsome reward!"

"I see," said Rama thoughtfully, and turned his eyes towards the dashing stranger who was still engaged in returning flattering cordialities to the women who had assembled around him.

This was Rama's only opportunity to outwit Gopal Bhand, who had not made any attempt to expose the identity of the traveller. If Rama could only find out where this man came from before Rajah Krishna Chandra offered the re-

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ward, then he would divulge the secret long before Gopal had time to do so. And this news would flash more quickly than lightning towards Navadwip and even Maya would know that a young man by the name of Rama had outwitted Gopal, the court-jester! Was not that the price of her love? Rama could not think clearly, he could only imagine. He felt Maya was already in his arms, her head rested on his chest, her lips trembling with longing. And then his dreams vanished as he looked at the calm and cultured face of the stranger. But he must devise some means in order to fathom the mystery of this man, otherwise Maya would always remain only a dream-goddess.

While he was meditating about his childhood love, Janaki came back to him and sat by his side. To-night, Janaki appeared more beautiful, more sinuous, more enticing, and yet she maintained her reserve. Her small transparent bodice in its attempt to clothe her breasts made them more alluring. Her white luscious arms were supple and shapely and pleaded mutely for his caresses. Her eyelashes painted with Shoorma (a black powder that preserves

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the lashes and clears the eyes) made her eyes look more languorous. The constant chewing of pau made her lips rosy red. Vermillion along her parted hair brought out the beautiful contour of her forehead. The golden waist-band, called Komor-pata, hung loose around her delicate waist. The silver Mauts around her ankles tingled with the rhythm of her body. Bracelets and bangles on her arms felt abashed before the texture of her skin, soft as the morning dew.

"Janaki, I am honoured," spoke Rama, "I thought you would never turn your eyes toward me. In my humility, I waited for you. I had to come, because I could not stay away from you; and yet I wondered whether you would welcome me, and even as I entered the room, you seemed so aloof that I felt distraught."

"You are still a boy," observed Janaki.

Her words pricked his heart like so many arrows. Some one else had said the same thing. It was his own Maya who had uttered the very same words. But why should he feel them so keenly when they came from Janaki, who was nothing but a courtesan; Rama could hardly utter the word, even to himself. Janaki was more than

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a professional singer to him. And yet Maya was his life, his ambition, his only joy.

"I do not understand you, Janaki," said Rama.

"Do you not know that I was breathlessly happy when I saw you come in?" whispered Janaki.

"Ah, how I wish a mighty storm would blow out the lamps," he said.

"Am I so ugly that you cannot tolerate me in a lighted room?"

"No, no, I would press you close to my heart and kiss you," he said.

A pink tinge played on her ivory cheeks. An inborn modesty lowered her head and her passion-filled eyes tried to hide their flame behind the drooping lashes. Again she realised that a courtesan did not belong to this world, that because she was a professional singer, the world was not willing to credit her with sincerity. It was the traditional heritage of gifted sing-song girls to sell their bodies at exorbitant prices to wealthy Zemindars and Rajahs. Janaki was forced to bow to this age-long custom.

That a woman could love art or music more

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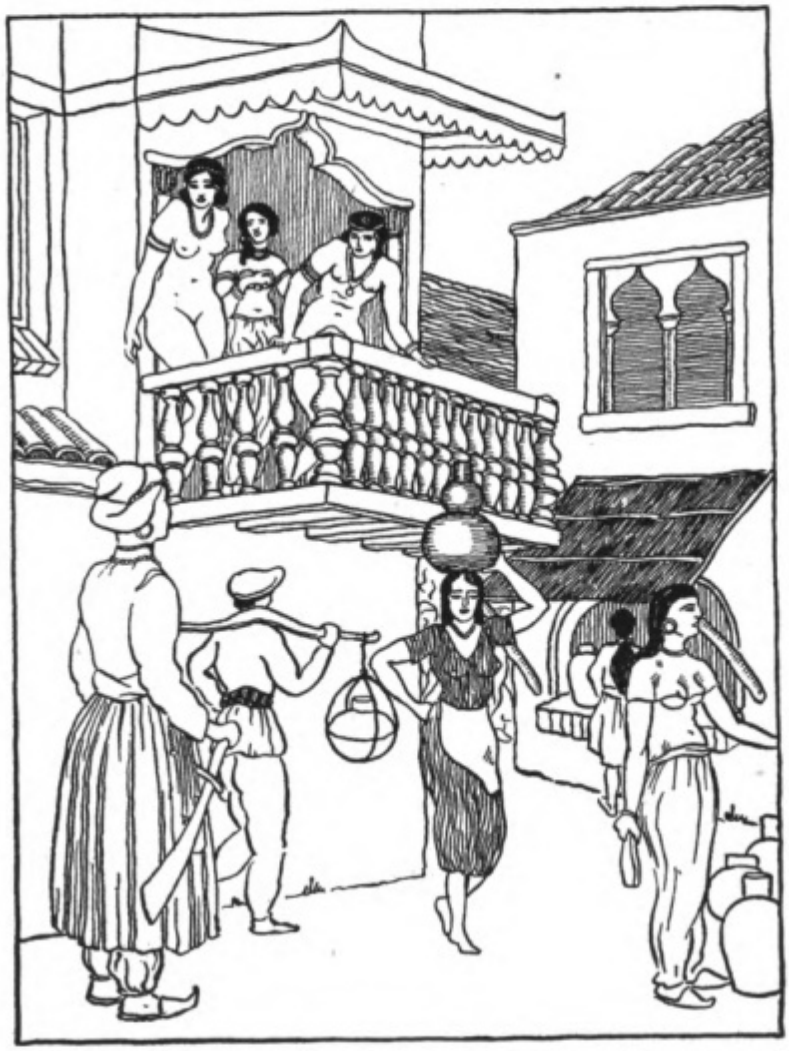

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than she loved to become a girl-wife, was too deep an enigma for the men of that age to delve into. So Janaki had to leave her parents and live with courtesans because she loved music, and only in a house of pleasure could women dance and sing. That was a dark age for gifted women.

"Pray let us talk about music," requested Janaki, who found it impossible to discuss the longing that lay in her heart. The men in the room would soon begin to make uncharitable remarks about them.

"Oh, yes," said Rama, trying to conceal his emotions, "I want to ask you something. Is there no way of discovering the origin of your latest guest? I thought he would very likely betray his provincial tongue when he was worked up to a point of ecstasy by some Jalad music."

"We have tried that," said Janaki; "the best means have failed; only Gopal Bhand remains."

But Rama did not give up hope so easily. He resolved to watch the man very, very closely. Oblivious of his surroundings, he scrutinised his victim. But nothing conspired in his favour. In moments of abandon, the stranger would pay homage to the singer in Hindustani; at

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times in Bengali, sometimes in Sanskrit, and at other times in Persian. What poise! This man was able to control his emotions in moments of extreme joy, when any one else would have been completely disarmed by the strains of the Sitar. No wonder even Rajah Krishna Chandra respected this man. Rama's hope sank into the fathomless deep as the stranger left the Baithak-Khana, and he placed his tired head on the bolster, closing his eyes. The beckoning face of Maya seemed to fade away into nothingness. The whole world melted into an eternal void as Rama realized that the gallant traveler had left. Tired in body and mind Rama fell asleep in the patient Janaki's lap.

In the dead of night Rama opened his eyes and knew he had not been dreaming; that the soft body on his bosom was not of Maya in a land of dream, but of Janaki, that the lips whose fragrance maddened his being were those of Janaki, that the loving arms that held him captive belonged to the one who was now smiling at him. Janaki was trembling. The more closely she

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clung to him, the more she trembled. She kissed his hot lips again and again until her soul melted into his. She knew he would never belong to her, that some day he would decide not to come back again, that some ominous moment would arrive when her arms could no longer hold him. She knew that he came to drown his sorrow in her. Perhaps some vain maiden had repulsed his love and he came to Janaki in order to satiate his unfulfilled urge. She knew her tragic Fate, yet little that Fate had thrown in her way was so keenly devoured by her as the precious moments that he had been sleeping in her arms.

With her eyes closed like an enchanted Apsara, Janaki had been sipping the honey out of his lips. Moments passed away before she dared look into his eyes. For an instant, she blushed and then when she found his eyes wide awake and alight with reciprocated passion, gazing full upon her she entwined herself about him, and nestled deeply into his embrace.

The room was dark; only a faint light was filtering through the open doors in her bed chamber. The front of the Baitak-Khana was closed. Disturbing the monotonous silence of

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the night came the gurgling sound of the struggling water in the hookah of the Saringi player who was listening to every movement in the house. He was alert like a dog. Tonight, Janaki had forgotten to bring blankets to cover them; her own body was almost bare excepting for the breast-bodice and the pantlets. The veil and the tiara were lying on the ground, and the flowing dancing skirt was lying in the centre of the room. Her shapely limbs were visible through the gauze costume, in the faint moonlight that struggled in through the slanting lattice work of the windows. Imbued with Janaki's passion a new desire was born in him. He was no longer a boy of yesterday who knew only of his consuming love for Maya, and failed to fathom another woman's heart. The innocence in Rama was gone forever. Gradually the realisation came upon him that even a woman of pleasure in extreme joy, could weep; that a maiden in a house of harlots would avoid the one she loved best; that a woman could suffer more keenly than a man, and that she in her mad longing for love was capable of more utter abandon than he!

To-night Rama knew that Janaki was weeping

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because of his pulsating caresses. What could he do to wipe her tears away? He closed her eyelids with his lips and drank her tears away, gently he smoothed her brow and passed his fingers through her silken hair. He cupped her head into his hands and breathed his hot passion on her lips. She encircled her arms about his neck and murmured, "I adore you."

He felt her moist lips on his and sensed the turbulence of her desire. Madly, he drew her towards him and gently stroked her trembling body. He placed his burning mouth on her neck and shoulders, and buried his face between her breasts. Janaki felt the mad beating of his heart. She raised herself towards him, his burning body met hers and they swooned into ecstatic oblivion. Rama gathered her in his arms and held her close to his body.

"Janaki, if we must die, let us die together; if it is a dream let me not wake from this dream," whispered Rama in a husky voice. His love for Maya was borne away into the air and perhaps would fade completely, but Janaki's fragrance was on him, her warmth hammered in his veins. He was deliciously happy and so was she!

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The grey mist of the dawn found them locked in each other's arms—so did the Saringi-player. Like a kind father, he covered them with a quilt and left the room. He wished Rama would always remain a true lover to her, then she would never lose the magic grandeur of her voice and he would never tire of accompanying her on the ancient Saringi!

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CHAPTER VII

The street-criers were beating drums in the King's high-way, temple bells chimed monotonously, yellow, red and purple banners were hoisted on each roof, priests were marching towards the Rajbari in processions, archers displayed their feats in meadows, horsemen cantered with regal dignity, and Gopal Bhand was slowly making his way to the court, because a son was born to Rajah Krishna Chandra.

Almost every subject in the capitol city of Krishna-nagar had paid his homage to the heir-apparent, but Gopal had not yet done so. The Rajah had been anxiously awaiting his court-jester; and his patience was almost tried to the end when Gopal entered the court. "Gopal, did you hear the good news?" asked the Rajah.

"Maharajah, I just received the glad news. May the child be worthy of his father."

"How happy are you?" asked Krishna Chandra.

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"As happy as I would be if I felt at ease," answered Gopal in a serious tone.

"Get out of my court," ordered the Rajah; "if you were not a clown I would have you hanged. Such impertinence!"

"Some day Rajah Krishna Chandra will appreciate the value of my words," said Gopal and walked out.

Unknown to the Rajah, Gopal went to see the cook who prepared the Rajah's food and asked him to put some easily digestible vegetables in the Rajah's meals. The cook understood what Gopal meant and did as he was bade. In the evening when the town was lighted to celebrate the birth of the heir to the throne and the army was parading in the fields, Gopal went back to the Rajbari and apologised to Krishna Chandra. Further, he begged to be allowed to accompany him on his tour of the celebrating city. The Rajah granted his request. Rama had been present in the court when Gopal had been unceremoniously dismissed by the Rajah, and in the evening he requested Gopal to take him along to the festivities. Gopal arranged with the coachman of the royal coach to permit Rama to sit next to him.

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Small oil lamps with linen wicks were placed along the cornices, window-sills, boundary walls and the edges of the verandah of each house in the city. Myriads of lamps were sparkling like fire-flies in the darkness of the night. Rama, seated next to the coachman, overheard every word of the conversation between Gopal Bhand and the Rajah.

"Gopal, I am in need of a comfort-station," said Rajah Krishna Chandra abruptly. Rama was astounded, but Gopal knew the vegetables had worked havoc in the Rajah.

"How can that be procured for your Majesty in a crowded street like this?" asked Gopal.

"I must, otherwise I will burst," insisted Krishna Chandra.

"It cannot be done, your reputed nobility will be damaged. Maharajah, please try to control yourself."

"Impossible, Gopal, impossible."

"Drive to my house," ordered Gopal to the coachman.

His Majesty went in, but Gopal waited in the coach and Rama was smiling on his high pedestal. A while later the Rajah came back much re-

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lieved and the court-jester asked him if Krishna Chandra ever felt happier in his life.

"Never, never," answered the Rajah.

"Then you know now what I meant when I said on hearing the good news of the birth of the heir to the throne, that I was as happy as I would be if I felt at ease."

"Gopal, the victory is yours," said Krishna Chandra.

Rama was greatly amused, feeling dejected at the same time. He enjoyed the pleasantry at the Rajah's expense, but he realised the futility of his attempt in trying to outwit Gopal Bhand, the unconquerable wit! The last hope was the traveler in the harlot's house. But even if the stranger left the Rajbari for some other kingdom, Gopal's wit would still remain just as sharp, and Rama would never be able to win Maya. Besides, the court-jester was a middle-aged man with all his varied experience to support his cleverness; while Rama, a young scholar, with no knowledge of life excepting what he had acquired from books, was hardly a match for Gopal. But hope never dies and he still looked forward to outwitting the famous clown.

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A week later, near the Dharma-Shalla, Rama saw the two astrologers whom he had met under a banyan tree on his way to the capitol. He recalled every word he had overheard from behind the trunk of the banyan. The astrologers had been going to Navadwip to see Maya and ask Ranjit Babu, Maya's father, to marry his daughter to the Zemindar Babu's son. With anxious and hasty steps Rama approached them.

"Namashkar, Bipin Babu, can you recall me?" asked Rama with a smile.

"Namashkar, Namashkar, how is your health?" greeted Bipin.

"With the grace of Doorga, I am still alive. And were you successful in your mission?"

"Unfortunately it was a waste of time and energy. Do you know, Rama Babu, it was the most peculiar case I had ever seen. Ranjit Babu was very willing to consider the proposal, but on consulting the stars we found out that Maya was already betrothed to a Zemindar's son. Ranjit Babu was astonished, but Maya only smiled a mischievous smile. Oh, Doorga! My feet ache so! After all this trouble, to be disappointed like that! But I am glad all the same. To give an

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idol of beauty like Maya in marriage with an idiot like our Zemindar's son, would be placing a pearl necklace around the neck of a monkey.''

Rama was tempted to ask Bipin Babu to learn the name of the Zemindar's son who had won the heart of Maya. But his courage failed him. He still hoped to outwit Gopal.

At last Rama was on the margin line of sorrow. To Gopal went the unchallenged crown of wit; and to an unknown Zemindar's son, Maya had given her heart away. What was left was only a blind hope and a temptation to believe that the astrologers had been wrong in their calculations, that Maya was yet available to the victor.

The more Rama had tried to numb his love for Maya, by enfolding Janaki in his arms, the greater was his ardor for the beloved of his youth. Little did he realise that untasted fruit is always sweetest, as is said in Bengal. But although merely an untried youth with little experience, Rama sensed that he would be able to content himself with Janaki if Maya were to disappoint him. Until then the courtesan was but an evening's forgetfulness to a man who was being consumed by indecision. He also knew that away

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from Janaki, he was tormented by loneliness, while with Janaki in his arms he forgot even Maya! He realised, however, that the attraction for Janaki was a passing infatuation and not love itself.

"Are you going to stay long in Krishnanagar?" Rama asked Bipin.

"No, we are going back to the Zemindar's estate to-morrow morning," answered Bipin. "We have done what was in our power. And here is a list of beautiful unmarried girls in Navadwip and its vicinity and their stars are in accordance with the birth-star of Zemindar Babu's son. What more can he expect us to do? Remember, that if he were to send us again bride hunting, he will have to provide us with two horses."

"I lay my salutations at your feet," said Rama with folded palms, and left them enwrapped in the smoke of their hookah. Some time later, Rama met his friend Biren, who seemed unusually happy.

"My heart dances with joy to see you smile," said Rama, placing his right hand on his shoulder.

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"Can you divine why I rejoice?" asked Biren.

"No, I can not," answered Rama thoughtfully.

"Rajah Krishna Chandra has just announced a reward of a hundred mohors!"

"To be given to the person, who succeeds in ascertaining the traveller's birthplace?" inquired Rama.

"You have guessed it correctly. At last we will know who this stranger is, because now Gopal Bhand will be on his trail, and to-morrow morning the Court will be crowded just to hear what Gopal has to say. I am told the stranger has already begun to pack his belongings. That only goes to say that his whole life has been a fraud! To-morrow morning, before the sun rises, the Rajbari will be humming with curiosity!"

The next morning a curious crowd had gathered. Questions concerning Gopal's whereabouts were heard.

"Where is Gopal? Where is Gopal?"

"There he comes!"

"No, that is a fat cow!"

"Here he is!"

"Are you blind?"

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"Then, where is he?"

"I think he has not left his bed yet."

"Then let us go after him."

"No, no, we could not do that."

"Why not?"

"Because he is a peculiar man."

"Where is he?"

Such was the hue and cry in the Rajbari, until Gopal walked in slowly with his cane under his arm. Rajah Krishna Chandra was already seated on his throne.

"Assembled gentlemen, let us pay our salutations to Rajah Krishna Chandra," began Gopal Bhand in his unique way; "the stranger is even now fleeing from our midst because last night was a night of revelation to him. When he was coming out of his house, late at night, I happened to be hiding behind the portals. And in the utter darkness as he was fumbling his way out, I placed my stick across his path. He stumbled and in his disgust, swore in his mother tongue."

"What did he swear?" was the unanimous cry from the court.

"Shaura," said Gopal.

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"Then he is an Oria, from the province of Orissa; Oh, he is an Oria! And how he has deluded us!"

Rama closed his eyes in despair and leaned back in his seat! Maya was again lost to him.

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CHAPTER VIII

So exquisite was Gopal's wit that he violated the laws of the domain and defied the Rajah's pride with impunity. In vain had Rama sought to cope with the court-jester; all efforts were futile! But now he finally admitted to himself the hopelessness of trying to outwit the leading sage of the Rajbari, that in Janaki's arms he had stilled the cry of youth, but that love was still denied to him. Yet, unlike a coward who fears to face his own defeat, Rama resolved to go back to Navadwip to see Maya. He would then tell her that in the name of his love he had gone to Krishna-nagar in order to outwit Gopal Bhand and that in order to silence his great love for her he had sought forgetfulness in the arms of a courtesan. And if after his confession Maya would continue to repulse him as she had done before, he would leave her forever, return to Janaki whose sweet charms were so generously dispensed and follow the path of revelry and lighter joys.

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On the eve of his departure for Navadwip he felt an irresistible urge to see Janaki for the last time. In his fancy he relived the delicious hours he had spent on her heaving breast. He was possessed with longing for her scented body and the love it inspired within him. Rama was torn by anguish, for how could he desecrate himself on the eve of his return to the unsuspecting Maya? Would he have the courage to tell Janaki that this would be their last night together, or were it better to leave her without a farewell? In spite of his reflections, he could not bear the thought of leaving Janaki; suddenly and with beating heart he rushed towards her abode. He felt relieved at this decision. He quickened his steps and reached her in a few moments. He was beside himself with joy and in her presence he forgot the approaching sorrow of parting.

Janaki sensed that this was Rama's last visit. She was more tender than ever before. She fondled him, nestled close to him and called him endearing names. She was determined that their last night together should be memorable. She was determined to bid him farewell in her own inimitable fashion.

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Janaki, whose sweet song had lulled and roused in him the passions of men, would sing to-night more sweetly than ever. The courtesan who came to the house of harlots to charm with her music, had also learned how to charm with her seductive body. And to-night of all nights, she would leave no device in the art of love unused. This was to be the courtesan's swan song dedicated in passion to the son of a noble Zemindar.

Janaki motioned Rama to follow her into the same four-walled paradise where one night ago they had enjoyed unimagined bliss. Silently she leaned forward and pressed the weight of her body against his. She gently stroked his face with her lust-laden fingers, while Rama followed her movements in silent adoration. Janaki, mad with love and sorrow, slowly and enticingly removed the veil which half covered her nymph-like body; another instant of ecstasy and Rama lay prostrate at her feet, murmuring, "Sweet Janaki, flower of my passion!"

He then lifted her and placed her upon a gorgeously embroidered divan. Theirs seemed a regal abandon. Whatever impediments there

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were, soon vanished under the magic touch of Janaki.

In this scented nest amid rose-coloured hues that dimly lighted the splendour of an oriental chamber, the two lovers lay limp in ecstatic abandon.

They awakened with the early dawn; mutely and tearlessly they parted.

The broken shores of Navadwip were shimmering in the early dawn when the boat was nearing the jagged water line! The city was preparing for the day's activities. The iron shades of the shops were up, the fishermen were carrying baskets of fish to the bazaar, ferry boats were crossing the Ganges ceaselessly. Sweet-meat shops were surrounded by pilgrims on their way to the temple. There were men, women and children of all castes bound by the ties of holiness. Everything was seething with animation.

Rama wandered about, admiring this scene on the shores of the Ganges! The fascinating rustic beauty of the impromptu bazaars and temporary

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shops was so different from the hectic life in the capitol city of Krishna-nagar. He thought there was more grandeur in his favourite Navadwip than he could find anywhere else in the world.

As the day advanced, Rama grew restless to see Maya. But it was not advisable to talk to her at this time of the day. Most likely her mother would be there and would hear every word he had to say. It was better to wait until the shadows of the night enveloped the landscape! Perhaps he would find Maya alone in the garden plucking jasmines for the Homestead Idol. Or, perhaps he would see her bejewelled from head to toe, anxiously awaiting the Zemindar's son, to whom she was already supposed to have been betrothed, as the astrologers had told Rama in the Rajdhani.

He stilled his hunger with some dates obtained from one of the vendors passing by and walked irresolutely back and forth imagining his meeting with Maya. He followed a bustling group and found himself in the market place of Navadwip. The crowds emphasised this desolate and hungry soul aimlessly roaming around to while away his time until the ominous moment

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came, the moment that would unite these two or bring an eternity between them.

An old woman on a verandah was tirelessly driving the shuttle of her loom. Rama stopped to watch the silver threads in her hair. She had lost all the members of her family. She was far from everything that was near and dear to her. That is why she was weaving a pattern of her own tragic fate in the tapestry. It was an intimate creation and not the production of a marketable handiwork by a clever weaver. Rama came closer and scrutinised the subject, the half-woven picture of a broken life. A small hut surrounded by a beautiful verandah; two infants playing innocently about and their proud mother standing near the lintel of the door. Poor old woman, who tried to relieve her passions by dreaming of days gone by.

This spectacle depressed him. He walked on, meeting various groups, each plying its own trade, too busy to see a passer-by. He especially watched a potter vigorously winding his wheel! He stood fascinated by the jugglery of the potter who moulded into shape varied jugs, pitchers and bowls just by the dexterity of his fingers.

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He wondered if Doorga moulded human life in the same way; or if perhaps stars really did exert any influence on the fate of the individuals.

A short distance away a basket-maker was scraping some bamboo-chips, in order to make them more flexible than cane. His wife was dipping some of them into red, green and blue dyes; and his young son was weaving the basket. His nimble fingers worked quickly and brought out the required shape and patterns. Next to him sat his brother, the "Chatai-walla," who made mattresses and bamboo screens. These always found a ready sale in distant markets. And he wondered where they were going in those nearby vessels. He would like to accompany them to the far away lands. Perhaps, if Maya does not want him.

A small shop-full of bracelets and bangles made of silver and finished with gold brought back thoughts of Janaki to him. Rama felt a tremor in his heart, Janaki the luscious one, could he ever forget her? He passed the shop and hurried on!

Nearby a merchant was smoking a hookah on the front verandah of his shop. Rama failed to

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discern what wares he was selling. Curiosity prompted him to enter the shop. Bending his head Rama went through the small door into the low room. Gold brocades, Benares Saris studded with hand-embroidered gold flowers, Cashmere shawls of exceptionally fine texture and yards of Moorshidabad silk were glittering on the wooden racks. Rama was not only pleased beyond words to see this gorgeous array of cloth, but felt tempted to purchase some of the silks for Maya! "I shall come again," said Rama to the merchant on leaving.

Next to this magnificent store was a small shop that specialized in ebony and ivory. Ebony boxes with inlaid ivory. Ebony sticks with ivory handles, ivory combs with inlaid gold! Everything brought back thoughts of Maya!

The most interesting sight was that of a tobacconist engaged in preparing the concoction for the hookah-smoke. Finely cut tobacco and liquid molasses were being vigorously mixed by the hammering fists of the man. He would go on beating this mixture until it became a plastic mass. Then he would put the richest quintessence of roses into the tobacco and begin to mix

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it carefully. And then he would mould it into small cuts ready for the hookah-smoker.

Now Rama admired a shop in which he saw everything that contained accessories to make beautiful women more delectable. Vermillion, sandal-wood, perfumes, burnt brick for removing callouses, perfumed cocoanut oil, used by them for dressing their hair. Rama dreamed of Maya's beautiful tresses that reached down to her knees. There were gorgeous mirrors of various shapes and materials, gathered from all parts of India. And dressing tables of carved bamboo, inlaid with the richest ivory.

The blazing sun moves so indolently to-day, mused Rama. It seemed the evening would never come. Must he wait that long? If Maya's mother happened to be occupied in household duties, he would have an opportunity to speak to his beloved. Otherwise he would be obliged to enquire politely of her mother about this Zemindar's son who had won the heart of her daughter.

Rama was about to walk out of the market place when he met a pundit from the Tole. The humble student took the dust off the pundit's

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feet and asked about his health. The great scholar blessed his favourite student and told him that a letter had come for him from some Zemindar. They could not do anything with it, because no one in the Tole knew where Rama had gone.

"Where have you been for so many days?" asked the pundit.

"I went to visit the Rajdhani and the noble Rajah who rules Navadwip," answered Rama.

"I am so glad you had a pleasant sojourn in the court of Krishna Chandra and I hope you kept away from the temptations that beset a young man in a large city. But if you had made us aware of your leaving Navadwip we would not have felt uneasy about you. However, what is done cannot be undone. And now claim your letter from Ganesh pundit, and may the tidings be happy."

"Namashkar," said Rama, thanking him for his concern and proceeded towards the Tole. The pundit's words rang in his ears, "I hope you kept away from temptation." Rama had violated the sacred trust of this pundit who would never know how many nights Rama had

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passed in Janaki's arms. Ah, but if the pundit had only known Janaki, who knows, but he too might have been tempted.

The Zemindar who had written to Rama was no one else but his own father, begging his son to return to the Zemindaree (estate) so that the match makers could begin to search for the Lotus flower that would bloom only when kissed by Rama.

A loving father was anxiously longing for his son's return! Rama suspected, however, that his father had been prevailed upon to write to him at the earnest entreaties of his mother, who could not wait any longer to see the face of her son, and to convince him that he must soon take a bride unto himself. And Rama could hardly blame his mother. It was time he was a husband.

There was no time to waste. He must answer his father's letter immediately and send it by some special messenger. But before he wrote, he must see Maya, and learn from her what his fate would be. Hastily he walked towards Maya's home. It was past midday and most likely both the mother and the daughter would be there.

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Nearing the cottage his feet tottered and his heart trembled. He felt his courage would fail him and that he could not declare his love for her and ask her to become his wife. Without lingering in the garden, he mounted the steps of the front verandah. Then standing near the door, he endeavoured to gain entrance.

"Maya, will you kindly see who is on the verandah? Perhaps a hungry beggar is seeking shelter and food at this time of the day," came a voice from within the house.

"Every word is true," said Rama to himself. Exhausted by the strain he suffered under, he rested for a moment on a small cane stool which he found in a corner of the verandah. A great urge to see his beloved overcame him. His hungry eyes were wandering about for a glimpse of Maya.

"Maya, aren't you going to open the door?" asked her mother. "I do not know what is wrong with my child these days. She is so restless. Where is she, I wonder? But I must not keep the beggar waiting. She rose from her mat and proceeded towards the verandah.

"Rama! Oh, my son, where have you been

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all these days?'' exclaimed the gracious woman.

''I visited in the Rajdhani,'' was Rama's simple answer.

''Come inside at once or you will have blisters all over your body if you stay out longer in this burning sun!''

Rama went in and looked about, but could not find a trace of what his anxious eyes searched for. He dusted the feet of the gracious woman and then placed himself upon a grass mat on the floor. He enquired about her health and asked how the rest of the family were.

''My husband is very well, but Maya has been restless for the last two or three days,'' said the hostess. ''She hardly speaks to us. It seems she is moping all the time and yet she would not tell where the thorn is. If I ask her why she is sad, she smiles while assuring me that she is very happy. Did you quarrel with her before you left for Krishna-nagar?''

''Quarrel with Maya? That would be impossible. One never disagrees with saintly maidens.''

''I am relieved to hear that,'' observed Devi, ''but do you know if Maya was ever secretly be-

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trothed to any one? I know that instead of talking to you about my own grievances, I should have asked how you enjoyed the great city of Krishna-nagar and how you liked our Rajah. But, Rama, you are like my own son, and I cannot help confiding in you, that my daughter is worrying me. Tell me, do you know of any one to whom Maya had already given her heart?''

''I do not know; she never told me. But why do you ask this question?''

''Because, a few days ago two astrologers came with a wonderful proposal; but as soon as they consulted the stars, they found that Maya already belonged to somebody. Babu and I felt as if a thunderbolt had fallen on our heads, but Maya only smiled. When we asked her who the man was she said that we knew and loved him. Beyond that, she would tell no more.''

Rama pondered a moment, his heart beating very fast. However, he continued:

''I am astonished; but where is she?''

''I have not seen her for some time. Perhaps she is in the Mandir (a small temple-shaped room, where the Homestead Idol was kept). She spends most of her time in there these days.

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My poor golden moon is waning away; and I do not know what to do.'' Tears rolled down her ivory cheeks as she uttered these words.

''Pray do not weep,'' requested Rama. ''Tears always bring ill omen in a family. I will try to find her. Perhaps she will tell me who causes this pain in her heart; and who this fortunate man may be who has enchanted her soul.''

Rama proceeded towards the Mandir and Devi put a cake and a small tobacco leaf in her mouth. Then she rested her head on her arm, as she reclined on the mattress, wondering at Rama's long absence and sudden return.

Nearing the portals of the Mandir, Rama stopped; he had heard Maya's voice. She was praying aloud; and he did not know whether he ought to overhear her prayers. But the temptation was too great, so Rama very cautiously and on his tip-toes stole nearer.

Maya was almost talking to herself. Her words were barely audible, and yet he did not fail to notice the pathos in her voice. He pressed

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his ear against the closed door of the Mandir. And then her words came distinctly to him.

"Mother Doorga," she prayed, "am I not punished enough for my indiscretion? Will not my Lord come back to me? Oh, Doorga, bring him back to me; I do not want any wealth or treasure, but I want him. Doorga, kindly tell him in his dream that I was not serious when I told him that my bridegroom must outwit Gopal Bhand. Is it true, oh Doorga, is it true that he is trying to kill his love for me by holding a courtesan in his arms? I know I am to blame for that; but I did not think that he could look at any other woman. Did he not know that I worshipped him? But I had wrought my own doom when I gave him that challenge! Doorga, Doorga, give me back my Lord. Doorga!"

Rama stood dumbfounded against the door. He hated himself for listening, and detested his inability to understand women. But how did Maya know anything about Janaki? Rama loathed himself. The words of the Yogi whom he had met in the jungle on his way to Krishnanagar, came back to him, and Rama realized what the Yogi had meant. Maya's challenge was

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only a means of avoiding the inevitable submission and abandon that follow the admission of love. And just because of one misunderstanding he had gone through days of torment, fostered an injured heart, and tried to indulge his senses in the scented body of a courtesan. But above all, stinging remorse seared his soul, when he had to admit to himself that he had embraced another woman and that he would not have the courage to face Maya and tell her he loved her only.

If he only believed that Maya was a girl of the typical Hindu family, that she would blame herself alone for his nights of debauchery in Krishna-nagar, but would never dream of belittling his love for her! In his frenzy Rama had not been able to assimilate what he had already heard. Maya's words in the temple were lost to him—only one thing he remembered, Maya's avowal of loyalty.

The temple suddenly became silent and Maya's voice was heard no longer. Perhaps she was stunned with grief and her voice failed her. Rama was too happy to face her then. He was mad with joy and anticipated the realisation of

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his dreams. Yet, he could not see Maya now, lest she thought that he had overheard her prayers. He quietly returned to her mother's room. She awaited him in the doorway.

"The Mandir doors are closed and I did not want to disturb Maya," said Rama.

"How do you know she is in the Mandir?" asked Devi.

"I heard her voice, though I could not understand her words. But I shall return in the evening. I must go now and write to my father."

"Your father? We did not know your father was alive. We always considered you an orphan!" observed Devi in amazement.

"I did not want to confide in anybody. When I came to Navadwip, years ago, I was admitted to the Tole as a poor orphan, because that was my wish. I did not want the pride of heritage to influence the small head of a student. But now that I have creditably finished my studies, I want you to know that my father is a wealthy Zemindar."

"Rama, it is difficult to believe you."

"Will you not believe the truth?" asked Rama.

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"I will, but this is something like a flood of moonlight on a poor cottage. It is hard to realize that our poor orphan Rama is the son of a wealthy Zemindar. And all these years we have known you as a lonely student without any relations in this wide world."

"Will you forgive me, if I leave you now? I will come back in the evening, and I hope Maya will feel better by then! Pranam! Salutations!" With these words, Rama left the room and rushed out into the street.

He did not go to the Tole, nor to the market-place. But espying his favourite sweetmeat shop near the temple, he felt his wallet in his waist, and walked into the shop. With a stone-tray full of eatables before him, Rama waited for water to wash his hands and feet.

When he had eaten enough to content him, he felt more calm and rested. And for the first time in many a moon he was able to reason. Then this man to whom Maya is supposed to have been betrothed could not have been any one else but his humble self. But when did this betrothal take place? He did not seem to have any recollection of it.

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Then like a flash of lightning in a dark sky, a beautiful vision passed before his eyes.

In days gone by, when Rama and Maya were in their tender childhood, they witnessed a wedding ceremony. And of all the rites and rituals which impressed them most, was the exchange of garlands between the bridegroom and the bride. This symbolic allusion united them as inseparable mates through eternity. A few days later, in her garden, Maya was threading jasmines into garlands. She had made two and was proceeding with the third, when Rama appeared on the scene. Maya placed one of the garlands around Rama's neck and the other around her own. Then with a smile she said, "Let us exchange garlands." Rama held his wreath with his hands, and Maya held hers. Then he did as she requested. Imitating what she had seen in the wedding ceremony, Maya took the dust off his feet and painted it on her forehead. As years rolled by, Rama forgot this incident; but Maya, as she matured, realized the significance of this exchange of garlands. When two people of opposite sexes exchange garlands in the name of Doorga, they become husband and wife accord-

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ing to the provision in Gandharva Marriage. That is why when Bipin, the astrologer, after consulting the stars, had told Ranjit Babu that his daughter was already betrothed to some one, Maya did not show any surprise. But Rama, since he had seen Bipin in the capitol city of Krishna-nagar, was trying to discover the name of the man to whom his Maya was supposed to have been betrothed.

But now everything was clear to him. He knew Maya belonged to him; even though he had failed to outwit Gopal Bhand!

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CHAPTER IX

The world was mad with moonlight and fragrant with the aroma of the Orient!

Hidden in the bed of roses and jasmine, Maya was plucking flowers indolently. Her anxious eyes searched beyond the field for only one man. He had come and gone, without seeing her, bearing the blessing of the scorching heat of the sun. Through a window Devi looked at her daughter and anxiously awaited the crucial moment when Rama would enter.

The moon became brighter and brighter. It was the full-moon night and a tense silence pervaded the glory of the evening. In that strange phase of the night, a man emerged from behind the mound. His handsome face gleamed and glowed in the silver rays of the moon.

With timid steps he approached Maya. She had felt his presence, yet she did not dare raise her eyes to look at him. He stood before her in silent adoration afraid to disturb the heavenly

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scene before him. He could almost hear the pulsation of her heart and the deep sighs that cruelly betrayed her longing.

"Maya, I have come back to you," said Rama.

She raised her eyes and looked into his. A pink tinge suffused her ivory cheeks. A languor emerged from her drooping lashes. But she did not speak.

"Maya, I have come back to tell you that I could not outwit Gopal Bhand; but through my failure I have realized that you are the idol of my heart. Were I beyond the shore of all human desire, I should still say the same thing—that you are the idol in the sanctum of my heart. If you still insist on waiting for the man who will outwit Gopal Bhand, then I must fade away from your life. But if it is true that when we exchanged garlands under the stars, we became man and wife in the name of Doorga, then even my failure would not affect your devotion to me. But if you want to look upon this incident of child-marriage as child's play, then I shall release you. I know I have little to offer you except my name, which is poor homage to my beloved."

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"Do you not understand," spoke Maya abruptly, "that I would have reminded you of our exchange of garlands, if I did not know that you are the son of a noble Zemindar? You are wealthy, your relations are wealthy and we are poor. If you were to tell your parents that you had resolved to make me your wife, they would think that I had bewitched you in order to obtain your riches. No, no, this must be the last time we see each other. I cannot divulge what is in my heart. My golden dreams are shattered to pieces and my hopes are turned to ashes."

She could speak no more. Untold emotions choked her, and she tried to control her sobs. Rama resolved to meet the situation and find an immediate solution. He took her hand into his; he gently raised her chin, gazed longingly into her eyes. And then in a few words he said, "Maya, you will be my wife in this life and all through eternity." He gathered her into his arms and covered her face with tender kisses. He breathed the perfume of her hair while she encircled his waist and silently pleaded for prolonged caresses. He delicately stroked her arms and neck and shoulders. The soft flesh of her

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body yielded to the magic touch of her beloved Rama. Her ecstasy knew no bounds and gratefully she permitted her beautifully shaped limbs, her firm white breasts to linger in the gaze of her beloved.

Within a month, Ranjit Babu's cottage had undergone a transformation. The walls were glittering, and the verandah was decorated with leaves of Deodar trees. Two green cocoanuts were placed on two earthenware water-pails, at the foot of the verandah steps. The priests awaited the "Lagna," the happy moment as determined by astrologers for the lighting of the sacrificial fire before the Homestead Idol.

In the dead of night one of the priests announced the Lagna, and women blew through conch-shells. The Home-fire was lighted with sandal wood, and clarified butter was poured on it intermittently. Sanskrit verses were chanted by the priests. Then Rama's father recited the names of his ancestors for fifteen generations, and Ranjit Babu then announced his lineage.

Eventually, the auspicious moment arrived

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when the four eyes must meet. Rama was asked to stand before the fire, and Maya on a wooden seat was lifted from the ground and brought before her Lord. Her veil was removed during a breathless silence and the four eyes gazed into each other. They tied the corner of her Sari with a corner of his chaddar (a shawl) in an emblematic knot, that shall never break, signifying the eternal union of two souls.

And now the garlands were exchanged, plighting them forever.

Gongs reverberated with joy. Virgins blew the conch-shells; married women carrying brass trays studded with oil lamps, smiled with pride; priests uttered the sacred word "Om," Peace! Then the women formed a circle and went around Rama. Maya joined them in the ritual.

Cautiously counting each round, Maya had to encircle her betrothed seven times, thereby tying him in seven sacred knots.

In the evening of the sacred day, the room allotted to the bride and the groom was crowded with relations. Rama knew that he would not

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have a moment to himself. Witty repartee was on and every woman was trying to outwit the bridegroom. Some one gave him Sandesh, a sweetmeat stuffed with mud, and asked Rama to eat it. There was no end of misery for him until the fourth Prahar of the night, when the relations of Maya decided to leave the room.

They lifted Maya in their arms and placed her on Rama's lap.

"Now she is happy!" they sang in unison.

In the faint light of the oil-lamp, Maya looked almost ethereal, too glorious to be human; and Rama held her tenderly in his arms. He wanted to be sure that the woman on his lap was Maya, his wife.

Passionately, he took her face in his warm hands, looked into her bliss-laden eyes, and kissed her half open mouth. An enticing fragrance emanated from her body and permeated his being. At last he found happiness and peace on the lips of his beloved Maya. He entwined himself about her as if to consume her body. He sank his burning face into her ivory bosom and kissed her flesh with mad delight.

All the oils, pomades and perfumes of the Ori-

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ent emanated no greater seductive charm than the scented limbs of his adored Maya.

Rent by half-fulfilled passions, Rama knelt before his beloved while his eyes longed for the blissful realisation of his dream.

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CHAPTER X

Drooping eyelids on tired eyes, yet hungry to see her husband, Maya gazed long at Rama. His arms were around her, his eyes were on her precious body, his head was resting on her cheek; he looked like a happy warrior after the conquest. Maya blushed and closed her eyes while Rama kissed her repeatedly. Like a contented child she nestled close to his breast, as if she had been in his arms all her life. He dared not ask her to go to sleep, because their relations were eavesdropping through the partitions and the cracked vent through the portals, in accordance with the age-long tradition of the country.

"Pray, is it really you?" asked Rama.

In answer to his question, she offered her pouted lips and passed her arms around his neck.

"Is it true that my half-blossomed rose is maddening my being with her fragrance?" whispered Rama.

She placed her head against his cheek and re-

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mained silent. She stroked his face, his hair, and his lips with her hand.

"At last Doorga answered my prayers!" breathed Maya almost to herself. A deep sigh followed this utterance. It was an expression of the epilogue of sorrow, suspense, anxiety and unalloyed joy; it was an emblem of the dawn of a new life.

To-night Rama knew the difference between love and lust. To-night Maya thrilled with the anticipation of intimate contact. To-night they both knew that life could be changed from lonely barrenness to delirious ecstasy, even beyond their wildest dreams. The stars cast their sacred shadows over the lives of the two youthful pilgrims.

Lest he disturb the peace that silence alone could create, lest he defile the love that words would fail to manifest, Rama remained motionless with the weight of the precious burden in his arms.

A grey mist floated on the verandah, dewdrops were glistening on every blade of grass and on every petal of each flower in the field. Song

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birds heralded the morn with tumultuous melodies and above this celestial din were heard the Sanskrit incantations of the priest. The bride's mother blew through the conch-shell, according to ancient custom. A happy smile suffused Rama's countenance. He knew he had not been dreaming because his wife was pressing closely to him, fast asleep. She resembled a dream goddess. The vermilion mark along her parted hair was shining radiantly. Her golden bracelets and pearl necklace enhanced her sensuous grace as she lay in his arms. The priest was still offering the morning prayer, and in silence Rama joined him devoutly.

Tenderly Rama lifted Maya in his arms and placed her on the bed and then covered her with a Cashmere shawl. He stood before her like an enchanted god and drank deeply of her beauty. Then gently, very gently, he kissed her moist eyelids.

Devi, after her morning bath was still in her wet Chali Sari. With a rosary of Rudrakkha beads, she was quickly uttering the names of the three hundred and thirty million gods. Rama approached her reverentially and took the dust

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off her feet. She blessed him with outstretched hands and then placed the palm of her right hand on his head.

"My moon face, may you live forever, so that the vermillion mark in Maya's hair may never fade. For as you know well, my son, widows are not allowed to have vermillion and widowhood is considered a curse in our land. May you bring sunshine into our home even when the sun fails to shine."

"Mother, your blessings will crown my forehead and your prayers will be the guiding star in our lives," said Rama in a grateful voice.

A Brahmin pundit, who had been saying his prayers in a corner of the verandah, approached the bridegroom.

"A man must be born fourteen times to deserve such blessings from Devi," he said, with his hand upraised in the air. Rama bent low and took the dust off the pundit's feet.

"May you be the man over whose head the whole world will hold the umbrella; may you be emperor of the world; and may you be Maya's Lord in every life through eternity," added the pundit.

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"May your blessings come true," wished Devi.

Then like waking birds coming out of their nests in the dead of night, unmarried maidens who were supposed to have been sleeping, came rushing into the verandah and captured Rama.

"Poor boy," observed Devi, as the young women dragged him from the verandah.

"Did you want to run away from us and hide in the corn fields; are you so sleepy?" said the mischievous women in teasing voices.

Poor Maya had also been pulled out of her bed. No one slept during the wedding night, such was the tradition of the ages and they were not going to allow even the bride to steal some sleep. More mischievous pranks were to follow and Rama and Maya were laughingly preparing for the worst.

Late in the evening a large flat-roofed tent was erected in the courtyard. The ground was strewn with soft sweet-smelling hay and a thick carpet was placed on top of it; then a large sheet of white linen covered the carpet. Only in the

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centre the grass was cut, the ground was smoothed and a plain velvet mat was stretched. There the entertainers would sit. Hanging lamps, supporting oil lamps and candles were suspended from cross bamboo poles; and the smoke of the incense was indolently and fragrantly rising out of the antique brass burners, which had been used at the time of Devi's marriage.

Cakes, sweetmeats, supari and tobacco in abundance were served on brass trays. Dancers and musicians entered the tent, which was teeming with men and women behind bamboo screens. The women could not be seen by the men, because there was no light in the women's section, as is the custom; but the unseen beauties could admire everything that was happening in the festivities. There was a hush as the musicians commenced to tune their instruments. Then a whisper was heard among the people. "They are from the North, they are from the North. They must be very efficient musicians."

Rama was seated among young men of his age, and Maya was surrounded by women behind the bamboo screen.

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A Saringi player, a Sitar player and a drummer began to play. And then with the first plaintive note of the Sitar there was perfect silence in the gathering. When the raging melody was being played in unison, a dancer appeared and began to sing and sway. Rama felt overwhelmed as soon as he heard her voice. He raised his head, and recognised a familiar face. It was Moti, who had once been Biren's Chamelli. Rama dared not speak nor move. Moti failed to earn the plaudits of the merrymakers, so she returned to her place after her first song. An expectant silence ensued.

With the second rendering rose another dancer. She had the voice of a nightingale. Her supple figure swayed like a bamboo.

"Pray come and dance before the bridegroom," requested the guests.

The dancer sinuously proceeded towards Rama. The musicians also rose from the floor carrying their instruments, for they too were anxious to see the bridegroom's face.

The dancer looked at Rama and he met her sorrowful gaze. She was Janaki. Her step went wrong, her voice trembled, but the Saringi

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player who knew all, covered her with the master strokes of his bow. But even in his Saringi was a groan of pain, for he loved Janaki as his own daughter. The courtesan removed a rose from her hair, threw it at Rama's feet and then she danced her way back to the centre of the Sabha.

It dawned upon Janaki that a courtesan's nest is in a house of harlotry.

The End

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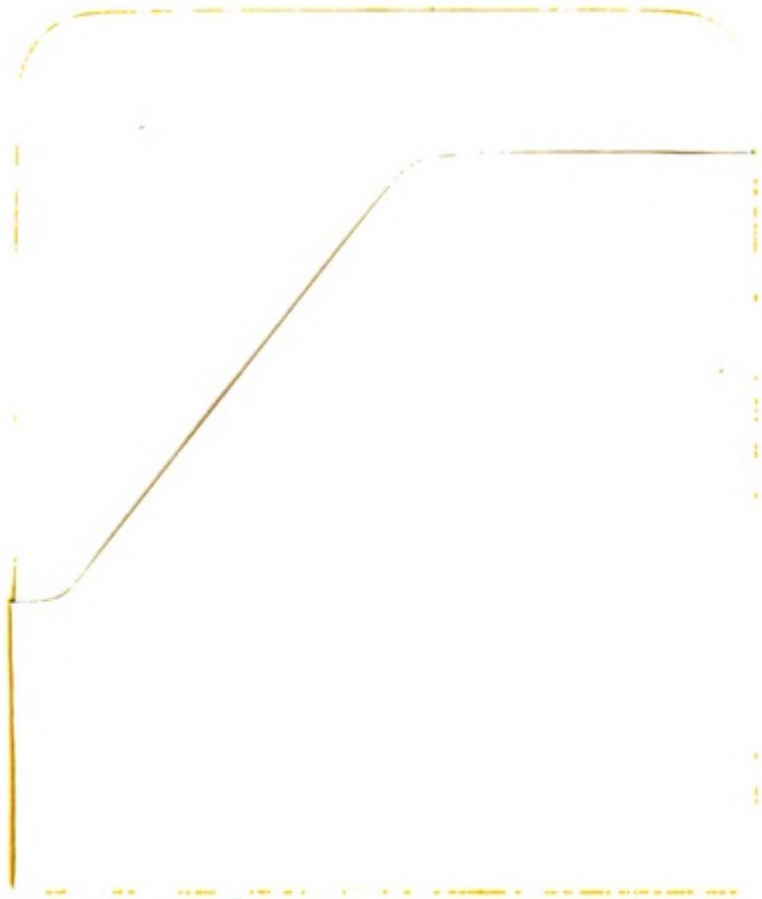

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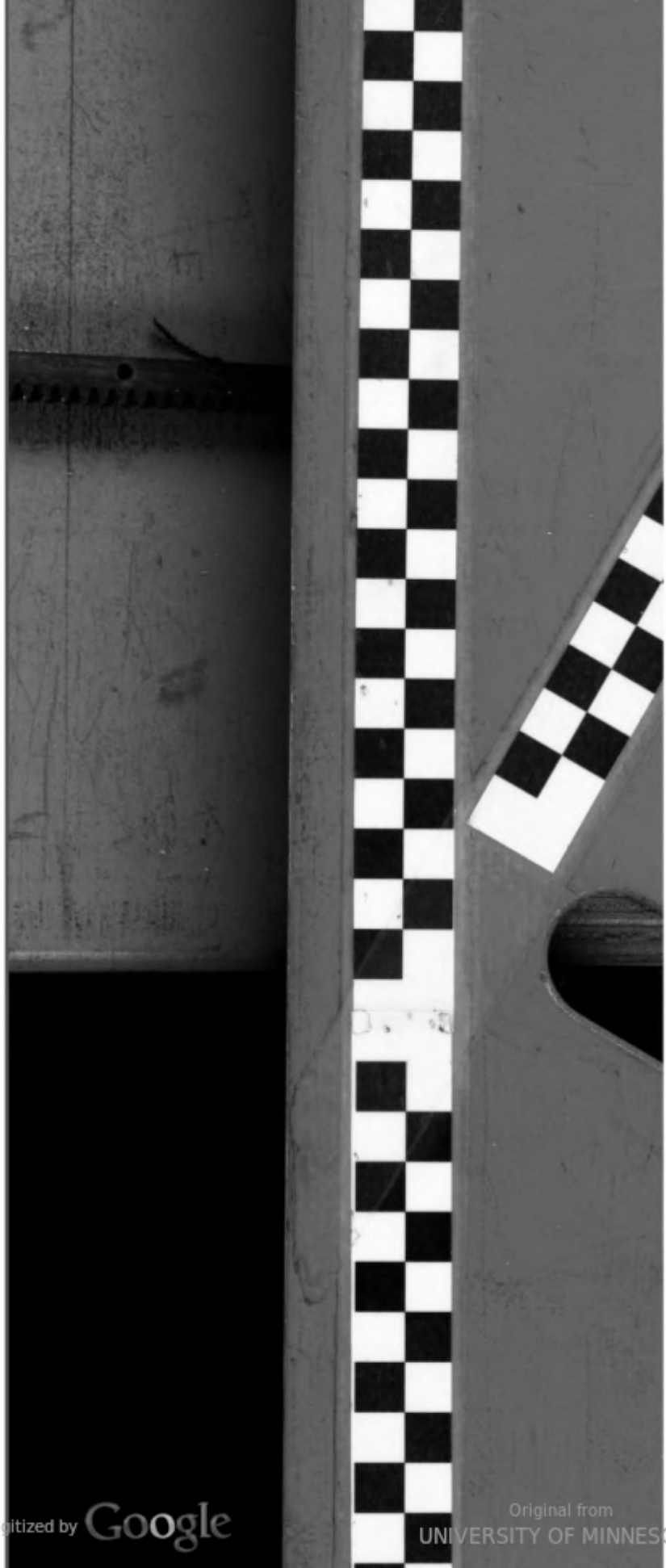

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